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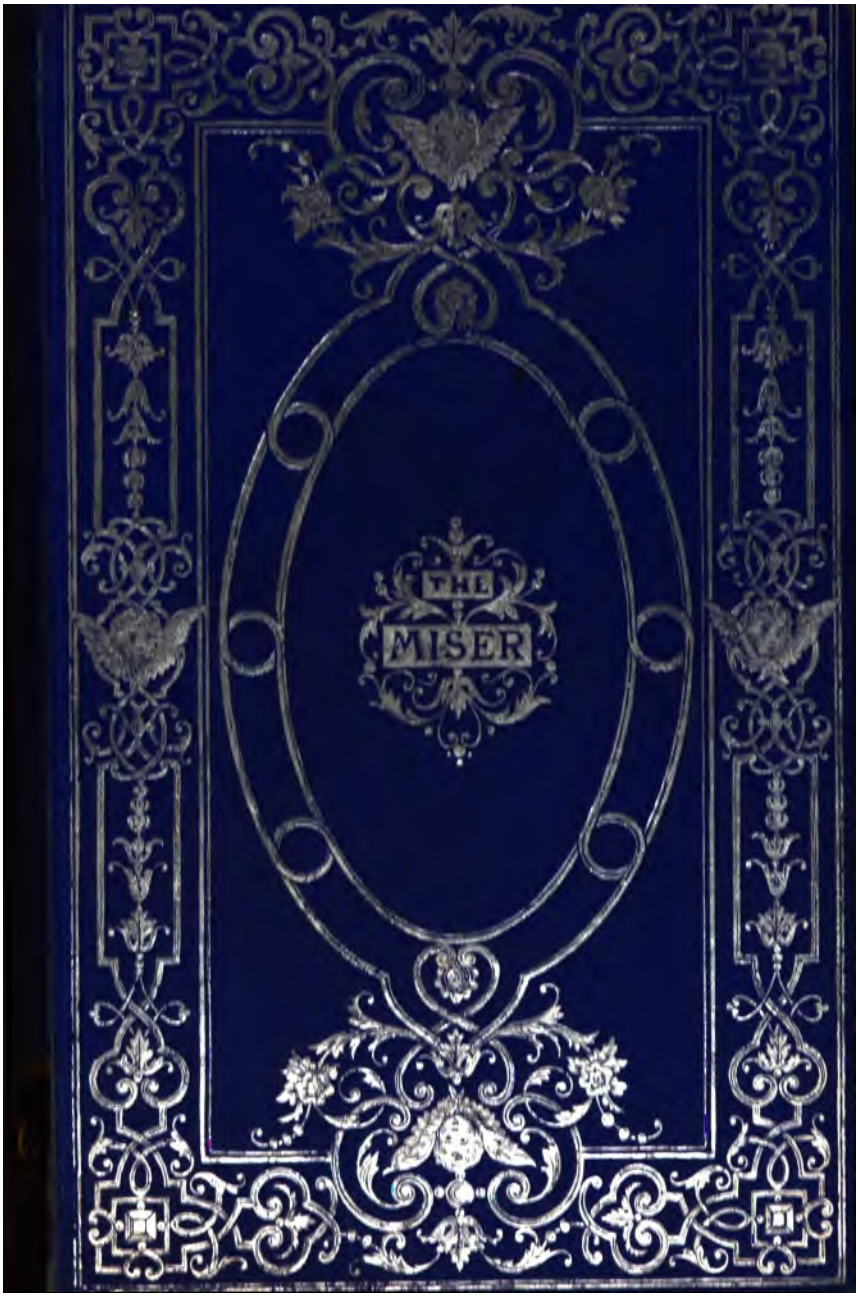
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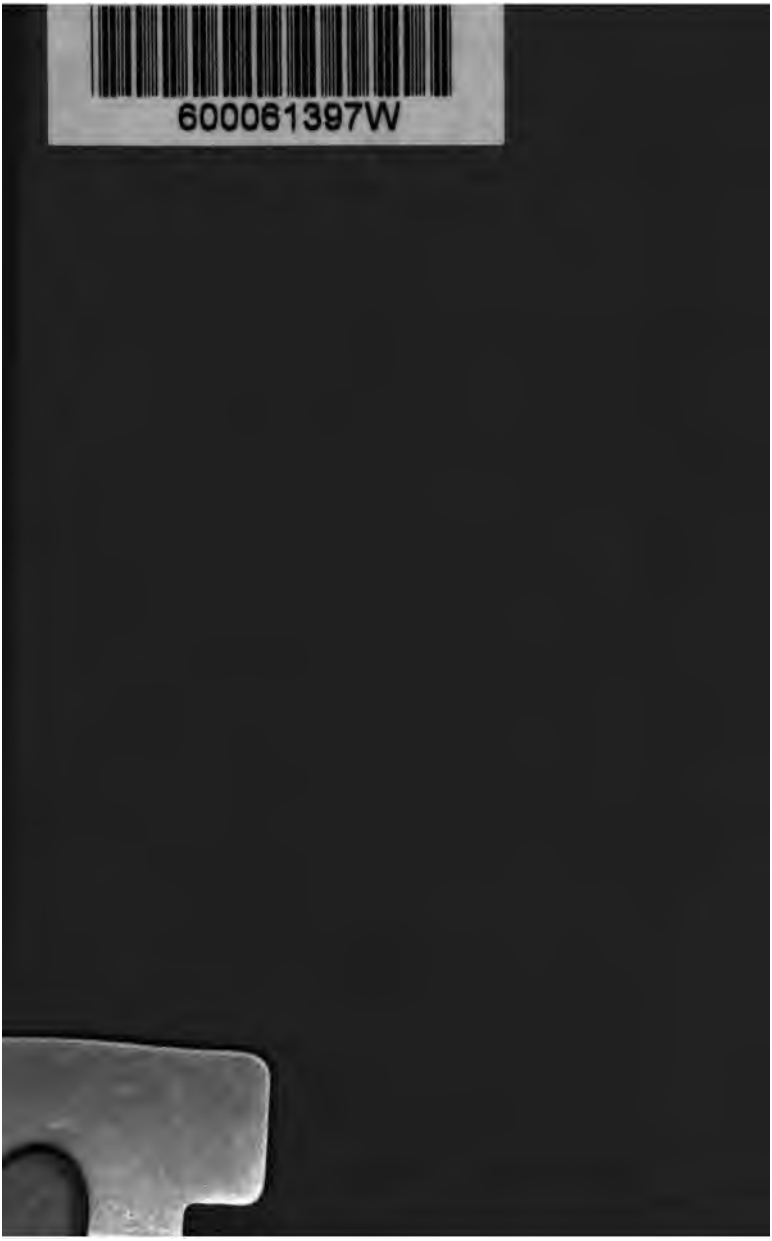
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THE MISER.

"The old man is playing with two children, to whom he speaks of economy, assuring them that it is the source of all wealth."

FRONTISPIECE.—*Page* 194.

THE MISER.

BY

HOPE INSLOW,

AUTHOR OF "THE VILLAGE INNKEEPER," ETC.

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THE MISER.

I.

It was winter. The snow, like a virgin's pall, covered the ground; the heath and the fields were still; everything slept. But this sleep was so calm, so full of the hope of a glad awaking, that the very sight of that monotonous absence of life caused the heart to beat, stirred by unaccountable happiness.

And it was natural. In the spotless azure of the heavens a beautiful winter sun was shining, flooding that slumbering nature with light. The immense carpet of snow seemed studded with millions of glittering pearls, for each snow-flake reflected the brilliant image of the orb of day, and thence resulted a radiance so splendid that one might have said the very snow was enlivened by a light and tint of its own.

As far as the eye could reach nothing sullied the pure white of the country, for even the village houses

and the church were nearly hidden under the folds of their winter clothing; there was nothing to form a contrast except the rigid foliage of the firs, which raised their dark green summits above the snow, and in their stillness resembled sentinels watching over a sleeping camp.

Although nature was wrapped in tranquillity and repose, man continued his dull and ceaseless labour; from each small farm, from each house in the village, rose a thousand voices, a thousand different sounds. Here the soil groaned under the measured beat of the flails; there resounded the impatient tick-tack of the corn-mills; further on re-echoed quick blows caused by stripping the flax, or the heavy murmur of the churn. Add to all this the sweet song of young girls, the peasants' shrill whistle, and then again the neighing of horses, the lowing of cows, and the plaintive and soft bleating of sheep—a grand hymn which ascends to God, and tells Him that His creatures rejoice in their labour, and are thanking Him for their lot on earth.

One single house in the midst of all this life remained silent and gloomy as the grave. Situated some paces from the village, it was evidently the remains of an old convent, the greater part of which had been burned or pulled down, for here and there

were fragments of thick walls still standing on the surrounding ground.

This habitation, formed of the only remaining wing of the cloister, and whose gothic windows were rudely blocked up with waste bricks, was, with the garden adjoining it, surrounded by high walls, supported here and there by projecting piers. But it was not this that arrested the passer-by before that strange dwelling, and caused him sad thoughts.

This mysterious habitation, the melancholy wreck of a vanished power and prosperity, had an appearance of decay and ruin—a ruin which saddened the heart. The surrounding ground was uncultivated and waste; enormous heaps of rubbish and deep ditches made it nearly inaccessible. The bare walls of the building were worn by time and furrowed with long cracks; the buttresses were falling into ruins on every side, and some of them were even lying overturned at the foot of the wall that they were intended to support. Nowhere could be seen the trace of any human hand that had endeavoured to repair disaster or retard decay.

From the gloomy silence prevailing in the neighbourhood, it might have been thought that this house was uninhabited, except for a pathway traced in the snow leading from the door towards the village, and

losing itself a little farther on in the high road. With closer attention there might even have been recognised amongst the men's steps marked in this path the more delicate impression of a woman's foot.

Inside the house, under a large chimney-piece, were seated two men, silent and motionless, their feet amongst the ashes on the hearth, their heads buried in their shoulders, as if the cold had deprived them of all feeling. The one was an old man, with white hair, eyes deeply sunk, cheeks pale and hollow; his back was bent, and his hands, every time he moved, trembled from weakness. The other was a man about forty years old, and in the vigour of life. His irregular features had a strange and undefinable expression which inspired distrust or antipathy. His small grey eyes, hidden under an overhanging forehead and thick eyebrows, shone in their socket like glowworms in the darkness; his nose, wide at the bottom, moved visibly each time he breathed; his mouth was large, and opened almost to the middle of his cheeks, and on his thick lips played a smile expressive of greediness and of many other ignoble passions.

The upper part of this man's face denoted wickedness and cunning, perhaps even intelligence; the lower part betokened brutal covetousness. From

this mingling of incongruous features, resulted an ensemble in itself very ugly, speaking physically, but uglier still on account of its moral import.

Everything which surrounded these two silent men appeared in harmony with themselves, and with the character which at first sight would have been attributed to them.

The spacious apartment, lofty and vaulted, was only half-lighted by a high window enclosed by thick bars of iron, but which, thanks to the absence of many a pane, allowed free access to the rain and wind.

Everywhere signal squalidness prevailed: the floor was covered with a bed of clay; long spiders' webs hung from the ceiling in black tufts along the walls; in the dark corners were lying heaps of things of every kind, shapeless and purposeless, amongst which might be recognised a quantity of worn-out old shoes; and if household utensils were perceived hung up to the ragged walls, or laid on the chimney-piece, they were all so covered with a thick coating of dust, that no one could suspect them of having been used during a long course of years.

Although the two persons of whom we have spoken were clad in very thick, although coarse and patched clothes, the cold was so intense that it pene-

trated through them; and it was a curious sight to see them stretch out their feet towards the single peat which was smouldering on the hearth, and bend down over it in order to prevent any ray of warmth rising into the chimney without having first absorbed all its strength. Sometimes, even, they held out their hands over a stone pot resting in the ashes, so as to take advantage of the thin steam which was exhaled from it.

The old man sat still, his eye fixed on the hearth; as to the other, although he rarely changed his position, his look told plainly that he was a prey to grave pre-occupation. It might have been said that he was waiting impatiently for the old man to awake, and that he was on the watch for any movement on the thin and lifeless face of the other.

After some moments, he took the bellows and began blowing the turf until a small blue flame burst from it. The old man arrested his hand with a feverish grasp, and said, in a trembling voice,—

"What is the matter? what are you doing, Matthew? Have done! Does not the turf burn quickly enough, that it must be blown thus? Are you cold?"

"On the contrary," replied Matthew; "but it is striking eight by the church, and it is time for breakfast."

"Well?"

"I thought it would do you good to eat something hot, Uncle John."

"To eat something hot! it weakens the stomach," grumbled the old man. "And then peat is so horribly dear."

In the meantime Matthew had put the jug on the table, and held out a spoon to his uncle. The latter began to stir and blow into the jug as if he was afraid of burning himself with the food it contained. Although he appeared to inhale the flavour with delight and with a longing smile, the food in question was anything but appetizing—it was only a quantity of hot water, in which were floating some pieces of brown bread.

At the first spoonful that he carried to his mouth, the old man cast at his companion a reproachful look, and said,—

"Matthew, Matthew! I don't know how you can thus waste the salt."

"There are only five grains, Uncle John."

"And what do I see! some grease? butter, indeed! Alas, you will bring me to rags in my old age! Matthew, Matthew! this is not well."

"You complain without reason," replied the other. "Cecilia warmed up some potatoes yesterday in

the pot, and she melted a large piece of butter in it."

"A large piece!"

"I should have washed and cleaned the pot—"

"No, no! there was no need to do it."

"Therefore I refrained: so we gain a little grease which otherwise might have been lost."

"I am wrong, Matthew. You are a good fellow; and if on my death-bed I have anything remaining, be sure I will reward you for your attention and your attachment."

At this moment some one knocked gently at the door, and a timid voice began earnestly to ask for bread.

"The widow of John the mason!" said Matthew, with a movement of angry impatience. "She has never had anything here, and every day she comes. What does this obstinacy mean? One would think she is paid to torment me!"

"Besides," exclaimed Uncle John, "give, always give! Get up, Matthew, and drive these lazy creatures away."

The door was opened slowly, a poor woman, very thin, appeared on the threshold, holding by the hand a little girl, who was shivering with the cold. She continued her entreaty.

Matthew had risen; he approached the woman, and said to her harshly,—

"Out with you. We have nothing to give; and take care how you come again. You certainly come to see if there is anything to steal. You are too idle to work. Get out, get out! and a little quicker, too."

The poor woman turned round to leave the inhospitable dwelling, but whether Matthew did it from pure spite, whether the beggar did not retire quickly enough, he pushed her—her and the child so roughly, that the little girl fell into the snow and began to cry loudly. Her eyes flaming, and her finger threatening, the mother exclaimed, "God will requite you, scoundrel!"

But Matthew, paying no attention to her threat, pushed the door violently behind her, and came back, smiling, to seat himself at the table.

After a whole string of imprecations on beggars, thieves, and idle people, they quietly returned to their interrupted repast.

"How do you find the broth, Baptiste?" asked the uncle.

"Really delicious, Uncle John; and poor Cecilia calls it food for dogs."

It was easy to see in his countenance that he pronounced the name of Cecilia with a purpose.

"By-the-bye, Matthew, do you not observe that Cecilia wanders more and more from the right road?" asked the old man. "She is becoming greedy—choice in her clothes—extravagant."

"Do I see it, Uncle John? I speak of it but seldom, for Cecilia is a spoilt child here; she can do everything she likes: eat butter, wear fine clothes, make the fire blaze, give away money! I am sorry for you, Uncle John, and I tremble when I reflect on the trouble which may come to you through your blind affection for her; and yet I am still more sorry for our poor Cecilia, who, led away as she is, is gradually taking to the wrong road."

"How much of the butter that you bought last week is still left?" asked the uncle, lost in thought.

"The half pound is again finished."

"Finished? Another half franc will be wanted to supply her waste. Good heavens! good heavens!"

"To-morrow, Uncle John."

Matthew, with ill-concealed delight, saw the old man put his hands to his forehead in despair, and all his limbs contract convulsively. A strange smile passed over his dogged face: he resumed,—

"Yes, believe me or not, Uncle John, but I am speaking the truth: Cecilia is thoroughly perverted by Mother Anne. In that house they give her all kinds

of dainties, they make a fire fit to burn the house, and they make game of us, so as to fill her with hatred for us. If Cecilia is always out, and conducts herself as if it rained money at your house, it is the widow's fault; but these hypocritical people well know what they are doing! They are investing money in a life annuity, which will return them a thousand per cent.!"

"Why, Matthew, Mother Anne is poor. At the time of her husband's death she could not pay the church fees; it is true that she had a coffin made of solid wood, and a decent funeral. But, in short, you speak of money, of waste, of putting out to interest! I do not understand you."

"You see, Uncle John," replied the other, with feigned sadness, "I can be silent no longer; for a length of time it has weighed on my conscience; and then, the affection I bear to my benefactor demands it from me."

"What do these mysterious words mean? You make me tremble."

"There is, indeed, cause, my poor Uncle John! Listen, I am going to tell you a thing that will surprise you, but for the love of God be calm and cool; if it is to grieve you so excessively I shall never forgive myself!"

"Well? Well?"

"Uncle John, you know that Mother Anne has a son?"

"Yes, little Bartholomew, that blackguard, that vagrant, who came to steal our apples before the garden wall was mended. If he does not come to the gallows when he is grown up, it will be because he has failed in his career."

"What you speak of, Uncle John, happened long ago; I was not here then. The child has become a young man. He plays other tricks now, which are not a hair's breadth better. On Sunday, and often during the week, when he has something else to do, he is about public-houses; he drinks whole pints of beer; he sings, he dances, he laughs, he is the life and soul wherever the wicked refrain is sung: "*Vive la Joie.*"

"Really it is a shame. And what does mother Anne say to it?"

"Pshaw, she is the same sort. She is as foolish about her son as if his name were already in the calendar. Now do you know why they fawn upon Cecilia at the Chapel Farm? why they give her dainties? why they attach her to themselves by making her greedy, vain, and extravagant?"

"Why?"

"Because the widow is plotting in secret an engagement between Cecilia and her son; because she wishes that your niece may be married to her son. Do you understand now, Uncle John?"

The old man shook his head like a person who is in doubt, and does not well apprehend what another wishes to show him.

"I understand, indeed," he said; "but what is there so alarming in it as to make me tremble? In any case I can give Cecilia no portion."

"My good Uncle John," exclaimed Matthew, in a pitying tone, "your loyal and generous heart cannot conceive of so much perfidy and covetousness. I will speak more clearly. Mother Anne is poor: her son also. You are rich—"

"Oh, oh!" cried out the old man with horror, as if he had heard blasphemy. "Rich? I rich? Who teaches you to say such infamous things?"

"Be calm, Uncle John, I know well enough what difficulty we have to make both ends meet. It is Mother Anne who reckons thus. Allow me for a minute to reason backwards, like the widow. She is poor, you are rich. Cecilia will inherit the half of what you leave. If she marries the widow's son, these spendthrifts will one day have in their hands the best of your property. There is then no cause for surprise

that they incur expense to inveigle your niece. Once more, it is a life annuity on you which will return them a thousand per cent. Do you understand now?"

The uncle, trembling, looked at Matthew with staring eyes. The latter appeared quite rejoiced at the old man's increasing emotion, and resumed in a quick and expressive voice,—

"You see, Uncle John, these false people hope that you will not live much longer. The Old Miser—that is what they call you—will scarcely be buried before the fiddler will strike up at their house; they will drink, feast, give themselves up to pleasure. Bartholomew will slink away to the cheer and rioting of the public-houses, and thus they will squander away the little that you have so laboriously collected. Alas, the worst of all is this, that in the end our poor Cecilia will find herself miserably poor, and perhaps will have to weep during her whole life for the error of a moment. May God preserve her from it."

Before the old man could speak, he was seized by a long and painful fit of coughing, a dismal sound, the echo of which reverberated in the dark arches of the room.

Matthew rose and held a wooden porringer before the mouth of his suffering uncle, whilst he gently slapped him on the back. One would have said that

his love for the old man was unbounded; his voice was gentle and sad, and he lavished on the invalid such affectionate caresses, that the most loving son could not have bestowed on his father more anxious care.

The cough was stopped at last; the poor uncle was able to recover breath. Still trembling, he seized Matthew's hand, pressed it in his own, and exclaimed in a tone of despair, whilst a flood of tears poured down his hollow cheeks, "Oh, thank you, my dear friend; you alone have pity on me. The others wish me dead. Cecilia, you whom I have loved as my own child, you, too, are ungrateful! Misery! misery! they will squander after my death the little money that I have saved by taking the bread from my mouth. Good heaven! if I were to die with this dreadful fear. And they dare to say I am rich, Matthew?"

"They call you the Rich Miser."

"They believe, perhaps, that I possess many hundred florins."

"Five thousand," the widow says.

"Alas! alas!" cried the old man, "it is thus that poverty and virtue are calumniated. Matthew, my friend, you know better what there is, you who share my misery and help me in my need?"

"They are venomous tongues, Uncle John; do not trouble yourself about it further, provided you could succeed in saving our unhappy Cecilia from their snares."

"Yes, our Cecilia and my poor money!" said the old man, sighing. "Oh, Matthew, if I was young I would become lavish, a spendthrift, a rake. But no, I should still finish by dying of hunger."

A short silence followed this exclamation. The old man seemed to be attacked with fever, and was visibly tormented by dark forebodings.

"Calm yourself, and take courage, Uncle John," said Matthew, in a comforting tone; "it is not yet in their power, odious deceivers! Cecilia perhaps does not suspect their evil designs the least in the world. The poor girl is deluded. She is on the edge of the precipice, it is true; but be sure that, with a good will and firm resolution, we may still easily save her."

His uncle fixed on him an eye full of hope, and said, in a supplicating voice,—

"Oh, for the love of God, my friend, advise me as to what I ought to do; my spirit is weak, and grief disquiets my mind."

"It is very simple, Uncle John. Do you wish to prevent Cecilia being married now or after your death

to a spendthrift? Well, then, give her an economical husband, who can make her happy."

"An economical husband," repeated the old man, in reality reflecting.

After long meditation he heaved a heavy sigh, and said, in a depressed voice,—

"It is of no use, I seek in vain through the whole village, and I find no one. The honest men I know are as old as I am, the others lead a life of expense and luxury."

"I do not, however," murmured Matthew, half smiling.

The uncle gazed at him with glad astonishment, and said,—

"Ah! how can a man thus lose his head. You are the only person of whom I should never have dreamt, and yet you alone answer the purpose. But you would not wish it, Matthew; doubtless you do not love her?"

Matthew let his head fall on his chest and appeared quite confused.

"I don't know," he said, in a hesitating voice, "but if I were rich, I would give my whole fortune to see her happy!"

"Then your love for her is assuredly very great, Matthew; but alas, my friend, she is afraid of you. It

is most certainly undeserved. One would say that her aversion is a disease of the imagination."

"I know that she hates me," said Matthew, interrupting him. "I am convinced that she will continue to hate me, and that I shall be unhappy with her."

"And you consent to take her as a wife?"

"A feeling of pity for her, my gratitude to you, impel me to this sacrifice. By mistake she detests me; well, I wish to save her, to be her guardian angel during her whole life, to lay by for her, to surround her with cares, and to watch that the little you have hoarded be religiously preserved; and, perhaps, who knows? perhaps in the end she will reward me by a little affection."

These words, pronounced in a magnanimous and resolute tone, made a deep impression on the old man's mind; he pressed Matthew's hand with emotion, and said, "I thank your noble heart! You are the only upright man that I know. So you will marry Cecilia, you will live with her near me, you will help me to die without too much misery, you will still watch after my death that the few sous that I have saved, if there should be any, are not foolishly squandered. May God bless you; I accept your sacrifice as a boon."

"Have you decided, Uncle John?"

"Irrevocably, my dear Matthew."

"But if Cecilia refuse?"

The old man shrugged his shoulders and was silent, like one who dares not answer.

"Always the same!" grumbled the other, with impatience mixed with anger.

"She bewitches me so easily, Matthew! Let me have a little time to persuade her. Do, also, in the meantime some little thing; be friendly to her, speak to her, do not dispute with her so severely about a little bit of butter more or less, put a good turf on one side against her return—"

"How weak you are, Uncle John!" replied Matthew, with a shade of irony; "if evil has taken root in her, it is not with a piece of butter that we shall triumph over it."

"Well, well!" answered the old man, half angrily, "if kindness won't do, we shall see."

Saying these words he rose, bent his steps towards the door, and continued, whilst coughing,—

"I am going upstairs; I am tired. At noon!—and don't put too much salt in the turnips."

"They are frozen, Uncle John!"

"They will be so much the more tender, Matthew: and take the same pot, it is still quite full of grease."

The uncle disappeared. An instant after the sound of his steps was heard on the staircase.

Matthew remained listening until he heard two or three doors shut.

Then his attitude suddenly changed. His back, half bent, straightened; a mocking smile contracted his lips; his eyes rolled rapidly under his eyebrows —he seemed happy, as if he had just gained a victory.

He approached the safe on tip-toe, took from it a loaf more than half white, and cut a thick slice, on which he spread half a finger of butter at least; his eyes sparkling, and still smiling, he bit it with good teeth, and swallowed the bread in an instant with disgusting gluttony. He closed the safe, put all in its place, and seated himself under the chimney-piece, then he put some turf on the fire, and set the iron bellows to work until a real flame rose from the hearth. After having rubbed his hands for some moments with an expression of thorough enjoyment, he became calm. An evil smile was depicted on his features, and he said within himself,—

"Ha, ha, the simple churl! He would divide a farthing into four. When he is obliged to give a penny he turns it over and over ten times, as if it were a part of his soul! Soon he will be having the

old shoes cooked, because they may possibly have been greased some time. And he is so poor! oh, so poor! As if I did not know why he locks all the doors when he is up-stairs. Now he is rummaging with full hands amongst the gold coins, the old sordid miser! Pshaw! there will be all the more, and I shall contrive that a good part comes to me."

After a short silence he resumed in a thoughtful tone,—

"It is strange that the old devil is anxious to know what will be done with his money after his death. Of all the follies in the world, avarice is much the most stupid. To love gold only because it shines! As well fall in love with a heap of bits of porcelain. No, if gold is the god of the world, its fame is not for nothing. It is the demon of Dr. Faust, the agent of all his power. A wish is scarcely expressed before it is accomplished. And that is how I love gold—more still than Uncle John. Let the old miser die, and then he may come and see if I continue to compete with the dogs of the neighbourhood, apropos of black bread boiled in clear water. This nest of spider's webs might, without great expense, become a small country seat, freshly painted inside and out—then some easy chairs will be wanted, fine clothes, a rich kitchen, meat in plenty, good beer at every meal,

and who knows, if the inheritance is good, wine and game. A horse, perhaps, and to become a gentleman, to have a servant, to send about those imbeciles of peasants—and with all that to save, for who gives nothing keeps long and much. Cecilia must inherit the half of everything, she is alone on his side; and if the other heirs do not put themselves in my way, I shall only have the other half: I am not of the family. But we shall see! When I got myself engaged by Uncle John, and entered this old convent, a humble slave of all his wishes, and of his smallest whims, I gave him even then four or five years to live. Ten years have already passed since that time; I have become a worn-out man; half no longer suffices, I must have all. But Cecilia! there is the difficulty. I must appear affable to her, speak to her of marriage. How enter upon that? If I loved her! I really believe that I experience something of that for her. Come, come, no nonsense; that would not prosper me. I am not handsome enough to risk the trial. There are other means quite as powerful, more powerful, perhaps."

After a pause his features were suddenly overcast, and, his eyes fixed on the ground, he murmured,—

"And if nothing can conquer her? If everything nteracts my design?"

A diabolical expression contracted his face, but it disappeared immediately, and he said in a jeering voice,—

"Why should one do evil before it is necessary? Let us try first, and if that won't do, then— In the meantime I will go over to the garden to seek under the snow for Uncle John's turnips, and on the way I will prepare some fine sentences for the time of Cecilia's return."

He disappeared smiling by the back door.

II.

A LITTLE farther from the village than the miser's gloomy dwelling, on the edge of the heath, rose a little farm, whose clay walls sufficiently attested that the inhabitants belonged to the humblest class of labourers. Still, however poor this habitation might appear, however monotonous the whiteness of the surrounding country might be, there reigned around the modest little farm a kind of movement and of life, indeed even of joy, which made this place as smiling as a picture created by the poetical imagination of an artist.

From the well, which poised its long arms in the air, a young peasant girl was drawing water intended to wash the carrots for the cattle. She had a face blooming with health and fresher than a rose. She was not afraid of plunging her bare arms into the half-frozen water, and was singing with her whole voice in so glad a tone, that, hearing her, one could not have failed to think of the coming month of May.

Beside the door of the farm stood a young peasant, as healthy as his neighbour. His fine eyes, full of sweetness, told of peace of mind and kindness of heart; his whole countenance, stamped with pleasant animation, seemed to smile at life. There was in his features, in his attitude, something so intelligent, so frank, and at the same time so refined, that in the midst of a hundred peasants of his own age, one must infallibly have designated him as the best gifted with respect to feeling and intelligence.

He was engaged splitting long branches of hazel ready to make hoops, and was carrying on the work at a fine rate; his movements were free and unconstrained; the branches flew in his hands. Such was his activity that he did not remain an instant without changing the place of his feet; he seemed to find pleasure in dancing whilst at his work. And, in fact, whilst his sister was singing near the well her dancing ditty, he began to whistle with her, and without knowing it, to move feet and hands to the tune.

A black dog, with tail wagging, was jumping up to play with the young man's hands, and barking at intervals as if he wished to join his voice to the song.

The pretty redbreast hopped about in the neigh-

bouring cherry trees, the chaffinch gaily sang his song on the shrubs which bordered the path, and the humble wren was running about through the hedges and brushwood.

The sun poured over all floods of light, causing the snow to shine on the roof of the humble farm like a bed of diamonds, the garden and the fields were covered with pink and purplish tints.

Whether the song was finished, whether she had to bend too low over the tub of carrots, the girl was silent.

The young peasant threw his cap into the air, caught it with his hand, and sang to a charming tune,—

"Don your blue holiday apron,
Cast away trouble and care,
The fife, the drum, and the fiddle,
I hear them already down there:
Away with dull sorrow, away with black care,
For to-morrow will be the day of the fair."

"Bartholomew, Bartholomew," said the girl, laughing; "there is your head upside down again! You will kill me with your tricks."

"Really, my dear Janet, if you check me I shall begin cutting capers that will be alarming; for I am as happy as if I had more money than Cecilia's uncle."

"Indeed! and why? for I see no cause. Is it that you want to go to the fair to-morrow?"

"Certainly, I shall be able to go to the fair, Jenny; it is time that we thought of finding a little pig—It is not on that account though—I have kept the secret a very long time, but come nearer and you shall know all."

He went to his sister, took her by the arm, and drew her behind the corner of the house with such mysterious gestures, that the girl was quite stupified, and looked at him with open eyes.

"Well, what does all this mean? What is the question?" murmured she.

"Hush!" said Bartholomew, in a whisper: he put his mouth to his sister's ear, and asked her, "What month are we in, Jenny?"

"Wait a minute. Last week we were in the first, I really think we are now in the little month." *

"In fact, to-morrow is the fourth of the little month. And do you know, Jenny, what day it is?"

"How should I know?"

"The *fourth*, Jenny; think again."

"The *fourth*, our mother's birthday?" replied the girl, her eyes fixed inquisitively on her brother's.

* The month of February.

"I am a mad-cap, am I not, Jenny?" said he, laughing; "however, if I had been away you would have forgotten it."

"This news gives me great pleasure; but I see no reason for being as delighted as you are. We will make a cake, we will roast some chestnuts, we will drink barley beer, and then we will tell tales and guess riddles. Try to find out something new, Bartholomew!"

"Yes, yes, Jenny—But it is not all that which makes me so happy—Will you say nothing about it? Will you tell mother nothing?"

"No, not a word."

"Listen, then; I have earned by splitting wood for hoops a pretty good sum, as you know. This year, for the first time, we shall be able to lay by some little—the rent and the taxes paid—see, I have still quite a load of split wood, and mother knows nothing about it. I receive for each bundle some halfpence more than formerly. To-morrow morning I am going to the town. I give my wood, I am paid, and I keep a little money, without mother knowing anything about—"

"Fie, Bartholomew," said the girl, in an indignant voice; "you may be sure that I shall tell mother at once."

"Don't take the part of a spy so quickly, Jenny. Let me finish, and if you, yourself, do not dance for joy, say that I am a liar. Have you not seen, Janet, how wretchedly worn out our mother's neck-handkerchief is, and how miserable it looks? I am almost ashamed when I see her at church with that rag."

"It is, indeed, quite true, Bartholomew: I have the same feeling."

"Well, Jenny, do you guess? No? I am going to buy mother a beautiful large handkerchief, so beautiful that Madame Meulemans, the farmer's wife, at the château, has none more beautiful. It will be quite covered with red, yellow, and blue flowers, so that we shall be able to see it from here to church."

The girl pressed her brother's hand, and said with that kind feeling which comes from the heart,—

"Oh, that is good, Bartholomew! how pleased mother will be!"

"That is not all, little sister," replied the young man, delighted. "We must have a bouquet of flowers. I know three songs, four tales, and seven riddles; but there—everything that is newest. I learnt them on purpose, and kept them for mother's birthday. Oh! Jenny, Jenny, how we will laugh and sing! How jolly we will be! The tears came into my eyes at the thought of my mother's face when Cecilia gives her in

mid winter a real large bouquet of flowers, and puts the handkerchief on her shoulders."

"But, Bartholomew, I am looking all round, and wondering where you are going to find flowers. I believe you have lost your head!"

The young man's face assumed an expression of quiet fun, and he said, smiling and looking into his sister's eyes,—

"Jenny, don't you know a fellow who is called Frank? Fair, with large eyes, who is servant to the gardener at the château?"

The girl blushed to her ears, and, quite confused, cast down her eyes.

"Come, come!" said Bartholomew, gently, "you must not blush, Jenny; he is a good fellow, who knows his business, and who knows how to laugh too when he has the chance. Don't you think, Jenny, that he will give me some flowers because I am your brother?"

Before the blushing girl could answer, a voice was heard from the house; it was the mother calling,—

"Bartholomew, Janet, come to table!"

The girl seized the opportunity to escape from her brother, and reached the door, whilst Bartholomew, following her, continued to say in a whisper,—

"Jenny, you may tell Cecilia; but not mother—not mother."

The mother was busy inside taking the broth out of a very large saucepan.

Near the fire was seated a young girl whose clothes, although in everything nearly like Janet's, derived much of a certain elegance in appearance from the style in which they were worn, and which rendered them less rustic. The paler face, the more refined features of this girl, the delicacy of her limbs also, caused her to be distinguished at first sight from a peasant. Her eyes were soft and limpid, the expression of her face calm and bewitching; on the whole there was something dreamy about her which was charming; something serious and reflective, which testified strength of mind and energy of feeling. She was working at a woman's garment.

The mother turned towards her, and said in a kindly voice,—

"Come, Cecilia, we are going to dinner."

At this moment Bartholomew entered singing,—

> "Away with dull sorrow, away with black care,
> For to-morrow will be the day of the fair."

But his eye had no sooner encountered Cecilia's sweet and grave face, than his voice was hushed, and

he slackened his steps as if a feeling of respect took possession of him in the young girl's presence.

All seated themselves at the table and thoughtfully asked a blessing, after which they began with good appetite to eat the excellent broth. The mother then placed on the table a large dish of potatoes and fried bacon.

All these people appeared happy; from every eye beamed health, contentment, gratitude. Bartholomew told one joke or another, pretended to burn himself, or made joyful and incomprehensible allusions to the morrow's fête, so that he kept his companions laughing through the whole meal.

They had scarcely commenced their second and last dish, when a light tap, which seemed to be struck by a timid hand, was heard at the door.

"It is the poor widow of the mason who was killed by a fall some months ago," said the mother. "I saw her on Sunday near the church, and told her that she might come every Tuesday to seek assistance. Janet, cut her a piece of bread. Come in," she called out, turning towards the door.

A woman still tolerably young, but whose cheeks were pale and thin, and her clothes so miserable and worn that the sight of her caused one a cold shudder, appeared on the threshold. Her face, though

pinched, bore a stamp of gravity and intelligence, and had in its expression something noble and courageous, which sufficiently attested that this woman was not born to beg.

A little girl hung on her hand, and the child's teeth chattered with the cold.

Janet took her the piece of bread, saying,—

"Poor Catherine, I should never have thought that you would one day be obliged to ask charity. You, so sensible, so hardworking! It grieves me."

"The winter is so long," said the widow, sighing. "There is no work for me, Janet. Hunger drives me from home; but in summer, when there is work, it will be better."

In the meantime the poor little girl fixed her eyes, shining with the eagerness of hunger, on the table, and her lips moist with longing.

Cecilia looked on at this scene with deep pity. All at once, as if a sudden thought had crossed her mind, she stared with a peculiar look at Bartholomew; and whether the latter understood it or followed the impulse of his own heart, he went to the poor widow, took her by the hand, and led her to the chair that he had just quitted.

"Seat yourself, my good Catherine," said he, "and

dine with us. Where there is enough for four there is enough for six."

Cecilia, too, had hastened to put the little girl on her chair.

Other seats were fetched, the widow's thanks were cut short, and all together attacked the inviting dish. Only when the poor woman had satisfied her first hunger, she looked with unspeakable tenderness at her little girl, who, careless and happy, was devouring potatoes and bacon. Silent tears began to fall from her eyes.

They all looked at her with astonishment, as if asking an explanation of this sudden sadness. Cecilia alone understood her, and said,—

"Doubtless you have other children, my good woman?"

"Yes, my dear young lady, I have two more," replied the widow; "this is the eldest; the others, poor little lambs, are quite alone at home without a fire; and for a week they have eaten nothing but brown bread!"

"But why have you begun crying all at once?" asked Janet.

The woman hung her head, and answered without looking at her.

"A mother,—you cannot understand that yet, my

child. It gives me pain to see my little Mary eat like this. The poor little ones down there are so hungry!"

Bartholomew rose abruptly, wiped his mouth, and exclaimed, "I believe it, indeed!"

Then turning towards his mother, he continued,—

"Mother, I will work every day two hours longer; I will spend no money on myself; but you must allow John's widow to come and dine here every day with one of her children, as long as my additional work and my economy suffice for it."

The mother's eyes were fixed, moist and bright, on her son, and she said in a gentle tone, whilst a tear fell from her eyelash,—

"Bartholomew, my son, I have loved you very dearly, but I love you more still, now."

A sweet expression of thankfulness was depicted on the suppliant's face; she seized Bartholomew's hand eagerly, and said in a grave voice,—

"God is just. You not only give to the poor widow the fruit of your toil, but more, your friendship, your heart; you do for me what you would do for a sister. God is just; you will be happy in this world!"

Cecilia's eyes, full of loving thankfulness, rested for an instant on Bartholomew's; the latter, touched

by the look and by the widow's words, raised his head proudly, but this deep emotion becoming painful to him, he started up abruptly with a burst of laughing and answered,—

"Be quiet, let me alone, or I shall go mad! Happy, happy, eh! I would not change my lot with that of a king! Come near the fire, my good woman, and warm yourself thoroughly. Come, Jenny, bring a few sticks, and blow, blow, that it may crackle well."

Cecilia had been seated for some minutes near the hearth, holding the little girl on her lap. What she was saying in a low voice to the happy child the others did not hear; but she must have said words of angelic sweetness to her, for the little thing twined her arms round the neck of her protectress and kissed her.

The poor widow contemplated this scene with a happy smile.

Soon Cecilia placed the child on the ground, drew near the mother, and spoke to her in a low voice; apparently she was begging the widow to leave the farm with her.

Janet, who was observing her like the others, came to her brother's side, and whispered to him,—

"What is Cecilia doing? Surely she will not take her to her uncle?"

"Don't you see she is going to give her some money?"

"Oh, yes, the fourteen sous she received just now from the landlady of the 'Stag' for making her child's clothes. Cecilia does, indeed, give all she can earn. Her uncle must know."

"Beware of meddling about that, Jenny. Most certainly it is no business of ours."

"No, Bartholomew, it is only to speak, do you see."

In the meantime the poor widow was busy thanking Mother Anne. Cecilia again directed towards Bartholomew a gratified smile, and said good-bye to all, promising to return in the afternoon. She took the little girl by the hand and, followed by the widow, left the farm.

Cecilia kept silence until they were some little distance off; at the end of the path she drew the poor woman behind an oak coppice, looked about on all sides to discover whether she could be seen, and said at last, in a constrained voice,—

"Your name is Catherine Melsens, I believe?"

"Yes, miss," answered the widow; "my late husband lived in his youth with your father."

"I know it, Catherine. Did he not tell you anything about what happened then at our house?"

"About a fire, miss? Yes, the fingers of his left hand were crooked and stiff from it."

For some moments Cecilia remained with her eyes obstinately fixed on the ground: she seemed to be in some trouble. The child looked at her compassionately, and pulled her quickly by the hand as if to make her to forget it, whilst Catherine gazed at the girl without speaking.

Soon Cecilia, took the poor woman's hand, and said to her,—

"Do you know, Catherine, that your husband saved my life at the great risk of his own? Yes, yes, without him, brave man, I should have been burnt alive!"

"But, miss, every one would have done the same in his place. Do not grieve about that."

"My sadness does not come from that, Catherine. I should like to shield your children from every want, and, alas! I cannot."

"One word from the heart, miss, is the best charity."

"Listen, my good woman, but say nothing about it. Here are fourteen sous; and when you come to-morrow with your other child, perhaps I shall be able to give you a little more; and then I will make your 'dren some clothes out of some which my dead

mother wore; they will be warm and good. Perhaps, also, I shall be able to find something useful for you. Oh! if God assisted me in my efforts, all your miseries would perhaps be over."

The widow, deeply touched by these words, yielded to her emotion, and began to weep. She bathed the young girl's hand with scalding tears and exclaimed,—

"Ah, miss, I have been so unhappy! yes, so unhappy, that sometimes I have been almost crazy. I should have been dead long ago, perhaps, if I could have died; but who would have taken care of my poor lambs? And now the kindness of your heart, your friendship even more than your assistance, make me forget my misery at once. Oh! I will pray to God for you! How my children and I will bless you on our knees in our cottage!"

"If I were rich! if I were rich!" said the girl, speaking to herself and sighing.

"Rich!" replied the woman. "You will be, miss, rich to hoards."

"You are mistaken, Catherine. The people here believe it, indeed; but they are certainly mistaken."

"Are you not your uncle's heir?"

"My good woman, my uncle is poor. He possesses nothing but the old house we live in, and some bits of land."

"No, no, miss, he has much, very much money. My husband was a mason, and formerly he worked in secret a long time for your uncle. There is, perhaps, only one person in the world who knows the rights of the affair, and that person is myself, miss."

Cecilia was overwhelmed with surprise.

"And I do not say it from pride, miss," continued the widow; "but I might call you cousin; for your uncle's deceased wife was the sister of my husband's mother. Thus things turn out in villages: the one is fortunate, the other unfortunate; the people are scattered through the whole country to seek for bread, and at last are no longer known to one another."

"So this dear little Mary would be my cousin?" asked Cecilia, with real delight, as she patted the child's head.

"Only distant—very distant," answered the widow. "If everything in the world went on as it ought, I also should have my share in the inheritance; but Matthew, that deceiving hypocrite, will take good care that our side has nothing."

"My uncle is, however, just," said Cecilia; "if his manner of living is strange, his heart is none the less good."

"I am aware of that, miss; but do you know Matthew?"

The young girl looked at her with an appearance of surprise.

"I know him, I do: he lived a long time in the village in which I was born; Matthew is a man who squandered all his parents' money, and caused his father to die of grief. As he was tolerably educated, he became in his necessity a kind of dealer in military weapons and also a business agent, and it is thus that he gained access to your uncle, in order to arrange a matter which was going wrong. He soon saw that the ground was good for deceit and lying. The spendthrift, the glutton, the wicked man, pretended to be a miser, sober and careful of everything. Do you know why, miss? To take away my inheritance, and the inheritance of many others on our side. And, perhaps,—but no, your uncle still loves you too much."

Cecilia stood still, her head hanging, her eyes cast down. Forgetful of herself, she was reflecting on the widow's strange information.

The latter resumed,—

"But fear nothing, miss; people sometimes have more courage and spirit for others than for themselves. Matthew well knows that poor Catherine may some time be found in his way. And, then, miss, you are alone on your side, and the nearest heir,

since your father was your uncle John's own brother. Another time we will speak at greater length of this affair. I want to put you on your guard against this traitor. But you have for too long a time already been giving proof of your kind feeling for the poor widow by remaining in this bitter cold. I am going to comfort my little children now, to take them good news, and to pray to God for you, miss."

Cecilia raised her head, took the beggar's hand, and said to her,—

"Catherine, will you do something for me? but you must not fail."

"Gladly, miss."

"Well, don't pray for me, but pray for my uncle. You will not forget?"

"I will do it."

"Good-bye till to-morrow, then."

The widow returned to the path, still expressing her gratitude in the strongest terms. At intervals she turned round towards Cecilia, who with a quick step was approaching her uncle's house.

"Mary, my child," said the poor mother, in an agitated voice, "last night you dreamt of an angel, did you not? Well, there is the angel, and that wicked Matthew is the devil! Come, Mary, let us run a little."

III.

CECILIA opened the door and entered. There was no one in the lower room. The cold solitude of this apartment made an impression on the girl's mind, although she was accustomed to it. She looked slowly round the room, and let her eyes wander absently over the walls hung with dark spiders' webs. An expression, half of sadness, half of pity, was depicted on her features, and she stood for some moments thoughtfully in the middle of the room. No doubt, in her own mind, she was making a comparison between the cheerfulness, the contentment, and the love which reigned in the widow's house, and the sad solitude of the place in which she now was. However, she soon seated herself near the hearth in the chimney corner, and fixed her wandering eye on the peat ashes. Some words which escaped her lips proved that she was still pre-occupied with the widow's remarks.

She had only been seated a few moments when a man's head appeared behind her through the half-

open door of an adjoining room. As soon as this man perceived the young girl, his face assumed a strange expression. His grey eyes sparkled with joy under his thick eyebrows, whilst his large mouth, contracted with a hideous smile, betrayed triumphant covetousness. He disappeared immediately, and soon after re-entered the room with three pieces of turf and a birch-faggot under his arm. His face had, at this moment, a smile as affable, and expressed a *bonhommie* as ingenuous as his repulsive physiognomy permitted.

"Good morning, Cecilia," said he, in a friendly voice. "It is cold, is it not? Come, take your feet away from the ashes, I am going to kindle a nice warm little fire for us."

The girl looked at him with surprise. This kind of voice was unknown to her; this frank and ingenuous smile she had never before seen on Matthew's face. However, as Catherine's words were still present to her mind, she continued in doubt as to what she ought to think of this change.

Matthew hastened to put the peat on the fire, and intentionally arranged the fuel so that it was nearly all on the side on which Cecilia was seated.

"What are you doing, Matthew?" she asked; "you are putting the wood beyond the hearth."

"That you may be well warmed, Cecilia," replied the other, at the same time introducing the bellows under the wood, and causing a bright flame to burst forth.

"There, that will do," said he. "Not on my account; but if it gives you pleasure, Cecilia, I shall take pleasure in it, even if I don't benefit by it."

"Matthew, Matthew!" exclaimed the girl; "I don't understand you; you are amusing yourself, are you not? You have become quite another man!"

"Cecilia," said Matthew, in a sorrowful voice, fixing a beseeching look on his companion, "Cecilia, you hate me. Oh! you do not know me!"

"Hate you! For shame, what a horrid word! I am afraid of you, Matthew, it is true; but you have such a scowling manner, and you speak to me so rudely! You know well enough, Matthew, I need affection, and I like to see kindness of heart: that is my character."

"You will not believe me, Cecilia; but I, too, am like that. I have always been so."

"You?" said the girl, incredulously.

"Ah, Cecilia," said he, sighing, "I grieve at being forced to reveal to you the secret of my whole conduct. I love Uncle John very much; the one aim

of my life has been till now no other than to soothe the last years of my benefactor, and to turn away from him as far as possible every sorrow. You, who are a woman, and guileless, cannot understand that one does a little evil to obtain a greater good. This, however, is what I have always done. Uncle John is a miser; his money is his soul. I am not blaming him, Cecilia. It is a weakness of his age. To contradict Uncle John on this point, or to thwart his passion, would be to embitter his life, and to shorten his days. Well, what have I done out of affection for him? I have made myself a miser, or at least I have pretended to be one; I have contented myself with wretched and bad food; I have suffered from hunger and cold, and spent whole days languishing in this house, which is as sad as a tomb. Yes, yes, Cecilia, my heart bleeds at the sight of any one in want, and yet I have thrust such from the door; I have longed ardently for the happiness of living with kind friends, and I have allowed the best years of my life to pass in sad isolation; I love you as the chaste image of pure and ingenuous virtue, and yet I have reprimanded you sharply, severely, sometimes. Why is all this? Oh, understand it, Cecilia! Is it not to humour Uncle John, and to solace his painful old age?"

The girl appeared quite convinced by Matthew's insinuating words. She still looked at him, however, with silent astonishment.

"Oh, I have suffered so!" he exclaimed, with a kind of despair. "To pretend incessantly, never to be able to be one's self, to be detested on account of one's very devotion, and to be obliged to stifle all in silence,—it is as if one had neither heart nor soul."

He covered his eyes with both hands, but through his fingers he watched the face of the agitated girl.

"Poor Matthew!" said Cecilia, with a sigh; "why did you not tell me sooner? I should not have been so unjust to you."

"And now," asked Matthew, "now that you know it," he uncovered his face, which assumed an expression of entreaty, "will you continue to hate me?"

"I have never hated you, Matthew," Cecilia answered; "if I had, why should I rejoice to see your friendship for me? I ought to live with you here as if you were my brother. Well, I will love and cherish you as my brother."

"Then you will fear me no longer?"

"Why should I fear you since you have a kind heart?"

A moment's silence followed these words. Mat-

thew was evidently thinking of something within himself, for his look became uncertain and wandering.

Suddenly he raised his head, and said, with apparent indifference,—

"Cecilia, I ought to tell you of something which will probably surprise you. Don't trouble yourself about it, however; as yet, they are only empty words."

"Then they cannot be very terrible," replied the young girl, smiling. "What is it, Matthew?"

"Uncle John wishes me to marry you."

"What? What are you saying?" exclaimed Cecilia, trembling with surprise and terror.

"I have refused," Matthew answered.

"Good heaven, what is the meaning of it?" said the girl, still quite excited.

"I have refused," Matthew repeated, attentively regarding the young girl.

"And he has renounced his project, has he not, Matthew?" she asked, entreatingly.

"No," answered the other; "however I try to persuade him, he holds to it, and wishes that the thing be done."

"Alas, alas!" said the girl, bursting into sobs, and putting her apron to her eyes to hide her tears.

Matthew's face wore the smile of a demon as he contemplated the weeping girl.

The latter soon rose from her seat, and asked in anguish,—

"Where is my uncle?"

"You know very well he is upstairs. If you call him, or if you go and trouble him, he will be cross about it all day."

Cecilia re-seated herself in despair, and said,—

"Oh, Matthew, dear Matthew, get this notion out of his head."

"Let us speak quietly for a little about this affair. Perhaps we shall discover the way to please everybody."

"Oh yes," said the girl, eagerly; "come to my assistance, Matthew. I shall be grateful to you for it all my life."

"You see, Cecilia, before grieving yourself, or accusing our uncle of thoughtlessness, it is necessary that you should know the grounds for his determination. Perhaps, then, you will experience a sentiment of gratitude. Our uncle thinks that he has not long to live; I believe that he is not mistaken. What grieves him most is the fear that he may die and leave you unprotected. Your marriage only can set him at rest on that subject."

"But, Matthew, I do not wish to be married; I am as yet much too young," said the girl, dejectedly.

"That was also my opinion; it is on that account that I at first refused," answered Matthew.

"Oh, heaven!" exclaimed Cecilia, terrified; "have you then changed your mind?"

"I do not know myself," he replied. "From that moment the sentiment of duty was awakened within me, and I am in doubt as to what generosity and sound reason demand of me. Consider first, Cecilia, that our uncle conceived this project months ago, that it has taken root in his heart. You know him; if he cannot bring it to a good end it will make him ill, it will, perhaps, kill him. Would you wish to be the cause of his death, Cecilia?"

"Oh, my God, my God!" exclaimed the young girl, raising her eyes to heaven.

"Would you wish to be the cause of his death, Cecilia?" Matthew reiterated.

"Oh, no, no!" she cried, putting both hands before her eyes, and beginning to weep again.

"Then you will marry me, so as not to shorten his life?"

"But, Matthew, you have positively refused, have you not?"

"I did, indeed, refuse; but when Uncle John in

despair threw himself on his knees, and implored my consent as a last boon, when he told me that he should die of grief if I did not yield, then I listened to my pity, to my love for him."

"But still you have not consented?"

"I do not wish to be the cause of his death. And you, Cecilia?"

"Oh, neither do I!" exclaimed the girl, sobbing. "I will tear from my uncle's mind his cruel design. He will not resist my tears, my entreaties."

"You do not hope it, Cecilia. When has he renounced a project? Well, if he demands this marriage of you, if he tells you himself that your refusal will kill him?"

"Oh, I shall obey!" said the young girl, shedding a torrent of tears.

She bowed her head, and with her apron before her eyes, continued to weep and to sob.

Matthew's face beamed with joy. He had expected more resistance, and believed the greatest difficulty removed. What had seemed to him at first impracticable had become possible. The girl's tears, though they might witness against him, did not upset his triumph; his victory delighted him so much, that, for once, truth was depicted on his face. Perhaps he thought the mask superfluous;

perhaps, also, in order to make his triumph more complete, he wished to employ the means which seemed to him sufficiently powerful to obtain the young girl's free consent. Although the latter no longer looked at him, he said to her, enthusiastically,—

"Your sadness is without foundation, Cecilia. We shall be the happiest people in the world. You shall have fine clothes; you shall live in a little chateau; you shall drive; at church you will sit in the choir, and people will bow to you as a lady. All the daintiest dishes will cover your table; we shall be waited on by servants; and we shall think of nothing but how to eat and drink well. You do not believe me? Uncle John is rich—rich to hoards. He has —scraping and collecting, and I know not how— amassed thousands and thousands of florins. It is on that account that he carefully bolts all the doors when he goes upstairs in the day-time, that he may count over his money.

The young girl was seized with a strange shivering.

"I guess by your movement what you wish to say, Cecilia," continued Matthew; "you reproach me for encouraging his avarice, do you not? Ah, do you not understand, then, that I am encouraging it for you

and for myself? There will be so much the more for us. You may say that having no claim I shall inherit nothing. It may appear so, but it is false. Uncle John gives me the half of his wealth, the remainder comes to you by law. Thus, Cecilia, we shall have—we two alone—Uncle John's whole fortune. How we will gratify all our wishes, how we will act the gentleman and lady!"

He no doubt considered the girl's silence as a tacit assent, for his voice assumed a triumphant raillery as he continued,—

"And we shall not wait much longer, Cecilia; you hear that Uncle John coughs more and more every day; his chest is gone. We will make him sign a will which secures everything to us two. It will be easy now. As soon as he dies—we can have nothing to do with that, may God have his soul!—the money will remain with us, and then we will prove whether or not we understand how to live."

Cecilia began to tremble more violently on hearing this last jest.

Matthew was silent for an instant, and seemed to expect an answer from her. As she remained seated, silent, and her head bowed down, he asked,—

"Well, Cecilia, are you still weeping?"

The girl got up slowly, raised her head haughtily,

and cast at Matthew a look so full of contempt, that he started in astonishment. Still he knew not what to think or hope for; Cecilia's face was more joyful than sad.

"Well, well, what do you say to it?" he asked, with some emotion.

"Traitor!" said the girl, with an expression of the most profound contempt.

"How now? What's this?" exclaimed Matthew, confounded.

"*I* become your wife!" replied the girl with courageous dignity; "help you to insult my uncle even after his death; plunder the widow and the orphan of their share of the inheritance? Were I going to be buried alive, on the edge of the grave I would still say, No!"

Silent and dismayed, Matthew looked at the proud young girl, whose eyes expressed such scorn that he lowered his under her glance.

"You thought, doubtless, that I was weeping with my face hidden under my apron? No, no! I have seen your heart opened, and I have been praying to heaven and thanking God for having permitted you to be frank. Now I know you!"

The trouble of the unmasked impostor lasted an instant yet; but as soon as he was convinced that the

girl's resolution was irrevocable, a vindictive laugh contracted his face.

"Oh, oh! it is thus you understand things. We shall see how it will go on. I shall know well enough how to force you to enter into my views. You say that you know me? How you deceive yourself! I am much worse than you think. A day will come when you will cringe, a suppliant at my knees."

"I will never do so, Matthew," said the girl, with imperturbable coolness.

"You will not do it? Oh! I can't help laughing at hearing you speak thus. Have I not your whole fortune in my hands? I will take everything from you."

"Take it!" she answered.

"I will have you turned out from here."

"Have me turned out!"

"Your uncle shall curse you on his death-bed."

Silent, and as it were crushed by this terrible threat, Cecilia bent down her head.

"Ah! you are losing courage? What is become of that fine intrepidity?" said Matthew, derisively. "I will deal you a still more telling blow. Do I not know why you scorn me? There is another man whom you would certainly accept as a husband and

without weeping; is it not so? The woman at the Chapel Farm has a son, a madcap, a drunkard; that's the man you want, is it not true? Well, you shall have him! You shall have him; yes, and then you can go and beg together. You would suffer and would bear everything to make head against me. I know it. Under your sweet and placid face you hide great obstinacy; but I will not revenge myself on you alone. My vengeance shall also overtake him who is the cause of your refusal. I will persecute Bartholomew and his mother: I will drive them on to ruin; my hatred shall cleave to them, and shall only leave them on the day when they shall be lying on wretched straw. And whose fault will it be that they are unhappy? Yours, yours alone!"

Cecilia was overwhelmed by these cruel words. She leaned her head against the chimney-piece, and seemed a prey to excessive grief.

A savage joy beamed on Matthew's face. In his countenance there was an expression so ignoble and so cruel, that you might have thought you saw a reptile which fascinates its prey by a venomous gaze, and wishes to make it suffer a thousand deaths before swallowing it.

"Uncle John will come down in a quarter of an hour," said he. "Once more, Cecilia, and for the

last time, I invite you to consider. Will you strive with me or accept peace? Will you be rich and happy, or become a servant, or perhaps go and beg? A quarter of an hour is soon gone!"

The girl raised her head, and answered, weeping,—

"I too will speak, *I:* I will tell my uncle everything. He shall know your perfidy. He has a kind heart; your wickedness will appal him."

"Come, come," said Matthew, interrupting her in a joking tone, "speak to him of my perfidy as you call it; relate to him word for word what I have said to you; he will not believe you. He has a kind heart, you say? It is exactly because of that, that he will do what I wish. Accuse me, accuse me! the sooner the better."

Saying these last words, Matthew gradually lowered his voice in such a way that Cecilia, who had again rested her head against the chimney-piece, only heard half the end of his sentence. At the same time the impostor reached on tip-toe a side door, and left the room, bolting the door on the inside without the least noise.

An instant after Cecilia heard Matthew's voice calling, "Uncle John! Uncle John!"

Trembling all over, the girl rose with great terror depicted on her face; she looked round the room.

"Oh, heaven!" she exclaimed; "he has gone to find my uncle, in order to deceive him beforehand."

She ran to open the door. A cry of despair escaped her when she perceived that Matthew had pushed the bolt on the inside.

"Alas!" she exclaimed, "he will not believe me; my only hope is lost. What is to be done? Oh, may God protect me!"

She sank on to a chair and remained without moving, her eye wandering like that of a maniac, looking without seeing, shuddering from time to time, when Matthew's or her uncle's steps, overhead, made the flooring creak.

She had only been seated a short time when the door opened, and Uncle John entered with Matthew.

The old man's face bespoke at once irritation and sadness. Matthew's countenance, on the contrary, had resumed its expression of pretended innocence. The latter went slowly, and apparently indifferently, to seat himself near the hearth.

The uncle also took a chair, sat down near the weeping girl and said, in a mournful tone,—

"Oh, Cecilia, I should never have believed that your ingratitude to me would go so far! I do not yet believe it. What I wish to do is for your good; it is my love for you which has alone inspired me with

the wish to make you marry a man whose economical habits guarantee to me that misery will not overtake you after my death. And you refuse!"

The girl sobbed more violently, but answered nothing.

Her uncle resumed in a gentler voice,—

"Come, Cecilia, my child, the evil is not irreparable; I knew quite well that from friendship to your old invalid uncle you would consent. You only spoke foolishly to Matthew, is it not so? Words that are said in a moment of passion do not come from the heart. Now I implore you, Cecilia, consent; accept our good Matthew as a husband: he will make you happy."

The girl rose; her face was pale with suffering; her cheeks quivered convulsively. She exclaimed, quite beside herself,—

"My husband! he! that venomous serpent!"

"Good heaven! good heaven! what harm have I done her?" said Matthew, in a distressed voice. "You see, indeed, uncle, that I cannot help it. Let her alone, I beg you; I do not wish to be a cause of grief to her."

"Deceiving hypocrite!" said the girl, casting on her persecutor a look of sovereign contempt.

During this time the old man was alternately con-

templating his two companions with as much stupefaction as if a miracle had taken place before his eyes. And there was cause for surprise; the girl whom he had known until now as gentle and submissive as a lamb was there, her eyes full of fire; the tone of her voice denoted an inflexible will. This manner, inspired by the revolt of her maidenly spirit against odious wickedness, made an unfavourable impression on the old man's mind. Tears ran down his hollow cheeks.

"Alas, everything, then, is treason and deceit; everything, even to Cecilia's heart! So, my child, you have dissimulated to this extent through long years? Oh, it will shorten my life."

The girl's spirit was broken at once by this cruel reproach; she fell on her knees before her uncle, and bathing his hands with her tears, she exclaimed,—

"Oh! you whom I love as a second father, do not believe him; he is a demon of perfidy! He does not love you; he makes game of you; he deceives and plays the hypocrite. He wants your money, he desires your death. Just now, even, he was saying against you things that have frightened me. For the love of God do not believe him! He is your enemy."

The old man's surprise increased more and more. Cecilia's words had produced on him an effect contrary to that which she was hoping for. He raised her and pushed her away. At the same time he shook his head sorrowfully, and looked at Matthew as if he would have asked him something.

"Do not be too angry with her, Uncle John," said the impostor. "You have been young; perhaps it has chanced that you too have loved. Therefore you ought to know how far one may be influenced by a blind sentiment of love, when greedy advisers busy themselves with stirring up this evil fire. But let us leave the thing there. Cecilia is imposed upon; she rather deserves your pity than your anger."

This insulting language, and her uncle's injustice towards her, again excited Cecilia excessively, and drew her out of her depression.

"Oh, it is too much!" she exclaimed, indignantly. "I do not want your pity, it would defile me. What! An instant ago, there, in that very place where you are standing, did you not rejoice in the hope that our uncle would not live much longer?"

"I said," answered Matthew, "that you ought not, by your resistance to his wish, to shorten the few years that God might yet grant him."

"It is false! it is false!" exclaimed Cecilia. "Did

you not laugh at my uncle, and did you not call him stingy? Did you not try to delude me, and to draw me into an execrable conspiracy with you, to squander my uncle's wealth after his death in luxury and good cheer? And the better to attain your ends, did you not tell me that my uncle has amassed millions and millions of florins?"

"What? What horrible things are these? Miserable child, you are inspired by the devil!" exclaimed her uncle, raising his hands. "I possess nothing—nothing!"

"Cecilia, why do you falsely interpret my words?" asked Matthew, in a complaining voice. "It is useless to commit such shameful wickedness. Uncle John will certainly not believe you. I have said, and I repeat it, that the widow at the Chapel Farm makes you believe these things. Why, then, impute to me the evil thoughts of others?"

The uncle began to cough. This was with him the ordinary indication of fatigue. One could see by his features that he was going to begin a violent tirade; and as anger caused his dull eyes to shine with a new flame, Matthew held out his hands towards the old man as if to stop him, and said in a supplicating voice,—

"Come, Uncle John, let the affair rest. Cecilia

appears anxious that things should not be according to your wish. Well, let her marry Bartholomew: it is she who will suffer most from it."

"Be silent!" said the irritated uncle; "it seems that you, too, incline towards these hateful notions. Cecilia, since you have neither spirit nor sense, it is for me to decide for you; I must put my experience in the place of your folly. Listen. I ask you for the last time, will you, yes or no, marry Matthew? Tears are no answer, I wish you to speak."

"Oh! my beloved uncle," exclaimed the young girl, holding out her hands towards him; "oh, if you knew what you are doing!"

"Answer! Will you have Matthew for a husband?"

"Oh!" said Cecilia, in a heart-rending voice, "if I were dragged by force to the church, I should hold my breath that I might be suffocated on the road."

"For shame! what dreadful words you are saying. Matthew is, at any rate, as good as any other man," said her uncle, in the greatest astonishment.

"A man! He a man!" exclaimed the girl, wildly. "He is the devil himself, the devil of falsity and covetousness!"

"Cecilia, unhappy child, I forgive you," said Matthew, sighing. "May God above likewise forgive you this calumny!"

"Very well," her uncle replied; "you will not have him for a husband?"

"Never!" Cecilia answered. "I am ready for every suffering; were I called to die the most cruel death, were I to be shamed before the whole world, I would never consent, never!"

Her uncle rose, and said in a resolute tone,—

"That will do; I will treat your ingratitude as it deserves. This afternoon you shall go to the Chapel Farm; you shall take away from there whatever belongs to you; you shall stay there three minutes; and if henceforth you chance to speak—to pay a visit—to those bad people; if even you dare to nod to them, then—"

A fresh fit of coughing overtook the old man and cut short his speech; it was evident that the sentence that he was going to pronounce made a painful impression on him.

Matthew, with a mocking look, comtemplated the young girl, who was sitting motionless on her chair and weeping bitterly.

The uncle, as soon as he could recover breath, resumed with more impatience,—

"Then I— Ah! I cannot say it. My child, my child, if you knew what pain you cause me!"

The plaintive accent of these last words profoundly

"Oh, I thank God that I have found my good Cecilia again!"

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affected Cecilia; she slipped from her chair, crept on her knees to the old man's feet, then she seized and kissed his hand and exclaimed,—

"Oh, I love you still! now as formerly! I would give all the years of my life to prolong yours, if God permitted me! Oh! have pity, have pity on me! and if I have said anything which grieves you, for the love of God forgive me!"

A smile of joy lighted up the old man's face. He was probably mistaken in the girl's intentions, for he replied in a softened voice,—

"There is pardon for all, Cecilia. I knew quite well that your heart could not thus have changed all at once. Let us forget it all, my child, the wisest man is mistaken sometimes. Oh, I thank God that I have found my good Cecilia again!"

Speaking thus he raised her up, and made a movement as if he wished to give her the kiss of reconciliation; but the girl directed at him a look so questioning and so strange, that he began to doubt.

"Well?" he asked, "I thought that you had consented?"

Trembling and as it were convulsed, Cecilia threw back her head, and ran round the room raising her hands, and saying in a heartrending voice,—

"He is bewitched! My God, my God, thou hast forsaken me!"

Matthew had risen; he approached his uncle and took him by the arm, saying to him,—

"Come, Uncle John, you will make yourself ill. There is nothing to be done. Rest yourself, and leave Cecilia to get calm; perhaps all will go better than we think."

At these words he led the old man, the victim of a fresh fit of coughing, into an adjoining room, the door of which he closed.

Cecilia, with her forehead resting against the wall, remained motionless as a statue, and nothing about her would have betrayed life had it not been for the painful sobs which burst from her heaving bosom.

IV.

THE next day, in the afternoon, the sun was shining in as pure a sky as on the preceding, but as it was declining towards the west a considerably enfeebled light only was diffused by it.

The snow, deprived of the glittering rays of the orb of day, was dull and lifeless; the birds, the most constant of winter, had already sought a refuge against the approaching cold of evening; a gloomy silence prevailed over slumbering nature.

At the Chapel Farm neither human voices nor sounds, the echoes of labour, were any longer to be heard. If the cow had not from time to time lowed in the shed, one might have thought that there was no living being in the place.

Janet was seated before a spinning-wheel, near the saucepan of food for the cows. Doubtless her mind must have been pre-occupied, for the thread frequently broke in her hand, or else in her abstraction she rested her foot on one side and continued to spin, although the wheel did not turn.

Her eye was fixed on the clock; she seemed to count each stroke of the pendulum, and frequently she looked at the hands, too slow for her wish, with an expression of impatient anger, as if it depended on the clock to accelerate the progress of time.

Suddenly she was drawn from her abstraction by an unforeseen accident, the saucepan exposed to too hot a fire boiled over, and the water flowed in streams into the fire.

"Well, Janet," exclaimed her mother, who from the farthest part of the stable had hastened up at the noise, "soon you will be letting the boiling water pour over you without perceiving it. My child, my child, since the last feast day you have become so dreamy that I really don't understand it."

The young girl seemed quite troubled and confused.

"Come, come, mother," she answered hastily, "let us take the saucepan to the shed. Then I will go quickly as far as the village, and get some green thread for Cecilia: she asked me to do it."

"If Cecilia asked for it, go at once; soon it will be too late, my child."

Whilst speaking they had carried the saucepan to the shed.

Janet returned to the room alone; she cast a satis-

fied glance at the clock, and bounded hastily to the door, with a scarcely suppressed cry of joy.

As soon as she was some distance on the road, and after having twice turned her head towards the farm, she began to laugh heartily, and said to herself,—

"Oh, oh, mother! how you will open your eyes presently; you will know then why I let the water run over."

At the same time she began to run and jump so quickly, that the snow flew in flakes under her feet.

She had not yet reached the village, when she heard the neighing of a horse behind the fir wood.

"Oh, there they are!" she exclaimed, joyfully. "Our Bles* is glad to come home, but if the poor beast knew something of what's in hand he would gallop."

She soon saw her brother appear in the distance with his cart at the turn of the wood. And although she could not make herself understood so far off, she called with all her might, beginning to run faster than before.

"Bartholomew! Bartholomew! Have you got it? Have you the handkerchief?"

The young peasant doubtless understood her gestures, for he rose, standing in the cart, and threw his

* Flemish equivalent of the traditional Bayard.

cap into the air, so that it fell down into the road a few steps off, and he was obliged to stop the horse and go and pick it up.

In the meantime his sister came running to him.

"Well, Bartholomew," she exclaimed, "have you the handkerchief?"

"Jenny, Jenny," he answered, with joyous enthusiasm, "I am very fortunate! Think of this. The man to whom I was to deliver my hoops—he is a confectioner—asked me why I appeared so happy the moment he paid me?"

"Yes, Bartholomew?" asked the girl, stamping with impatience in the snow, "that will do, but have you the handkerchief?"

"Certainly I have the handkerchief; but listen a little," replied the young man. "I spoke to this gentleman about our mother and her birthday."

"Let me see it, Bartholomew, let me see it!"

"And the gentleman, Jenny, do you know what he did? He said that he, too, wished to make mother a present!"

"Really. My goodness, that is nice!"

"Yes, and he has given me very good work for the whole winter."

"And is that the present for mother?"

"No, Jenny, he slipped into my hand a beautiful

five-franc piece, quite new, and he told me that I was to add that to the price of the handkerchief, so as to be able to buy a very good one."

"Five francs! And what does the handkerchief cost, then?"

"Eight francs and a half, Jenny! eight francs and a half!"

"Heaven help me, that is enough, dear Bartholomew, to keep the whole house for a month. Let me see it, then?"

"Yes, but first I have something else to tell you. The gentleman then took me home, where he had a number of copper-coloured pots, just like milk-jugs,* there were certainly a thousand, I believe, and all these pots were full, yes, quite full of sugar."

"A thousand jugs full of sugar!" exclaimed the girl, raising her hands. "But, Bartholomew, if you are speaking the truth, who can eat all that sugar?"

"Rich people, Jenny, for certain. And then the world is so large. But the best of the whole affair is, that he gave me five or six large packets of sugar-candy for mother. There is white, yellow, pink, brown, black, and I don't know what besides; in fact every colour."

"Black?"

* The milk is carried about in Flanders in large copper jugs.

"Yes, as black as pitch. Mother will know nothing about it. We shall laugh finely! Let us go on now, our Bles is beginning to get cold. I will show you the handkerchief. Be careful, don't rumple it. Show me your hands, Jenny."

"Oh, I have just been washing turnips only an instant ago."

Bartholomew had stepped up into the cart to take out the handkerchief, and whilst doing it he continued,—

"I only mean, dear sister, that there are some things that must not be touched without mittens. Eight francs and a half!"

He got down from the cart with a parcel wrapped up in paper, went with mysterious gestures to the side of the road, and there carefully untied the string which was round the parcel. Janet leaned over, her large eyes sparkling with curiosity, a smile of joyful expectation expanding on her features.

At last she saw the handkerchief. Mute with admiration, she looked fixedly at the open parcel.

"Well, Jenny, what do you say to it?" asked Bartholomew.

The girl was a moment without answering. Suddenly she began to clap her hands and jump for joy. Bartholomew did the same, and they might have been

seen, in their unaffected delight, dancing in the snow like children.

The horse turned round as if to ask what was going on.

"How beautiful it is; my goodness, how beautiful it is!" exclaimed Janet. "Oh, how pleased mother will be! Red, blue, yellow. It is enough to make one blind."

Bartholomew, with a full and deep voice, which awoke the echoes of the pine-wood, sang,—

> "Away with dull sorrow, away with black care,
> For to-morrow will be the day of the fair."

"Oh Jenny! Jenny!"

"Oh Bartholomew! Bartholomew!"

"Come, get into the cart, it is time," said the young man.

"Yes, and make Bles trot."

"No, Jenny, first we must understand what we are going to do."

Both got into the cart. The horse continued his route.

"Have you the flowers?" asked the young girl, looking all round in the cart.

"They are under me in the basket, with a stone bottle of barley beer," answered Bartholomew. "I

was going to forget that I have something to give you from Frank."

"For me? From Frank?" asked Janet, her cheeks tinged with a modest blush.

Bartholomew opened the basket and drew out some delicate little flowers.

"There," said he; "Frank begged me to give you those."

"What can I do with them?" asked the girl, thoughtfully.

"Do you know what these flowers are called, sister?" replied the young man. "I did not know either, but Frank told me. Oh, it is such a beautiful name."

"What are they called, then?"

"They are called *Forget-me-not!*"

The girl abruptly turned her back on Bartholomew to hide the vivid blush which overspread her face. Her brother looked at her a moment laughing, then asked,—

"Jenny, is Cecilia with mother?"

"She has not been to our house to-day," answered the girl. "I went to the convent to know what it means. That wicked Matthew received me as if I had come to steal something."

"And will not Cecilia come?"

"'She will come; she will come towards evening,' Matthew said, but with a smile, just like a dog which is going to bite."

"Pshaw, that matters little to us, provided she comes. Mother can take her back home if she stays a little late. Come, sister, seat yourself on the basket beside me, and let us see how we are going to arrange it all."

They commenced a dialogue, intermingled with joyous movements and clapping of hands from the young girl, but in so low a voice and so mysteriously, that a passer-by would not have been able to catch a single word.

When they had arrived before the door of the farm, Janet jumped down from the cart and entered the house; Bartholomew took out the horse and led him to the stable. Then, with a host of precautions, he carried out the parcel and the basket.

"Oh, good morning, mother," he exclaimed, entering the room. "Hold out your hand, I have some beautiful and good money for you."

Whilst putting some pieces of money into his mother's hand, he looked round the room; all at once his face darkened and assumed an expression of deep sadness.

"Doubtless you think that I shall not give you any

pocket-money because the mason's widow is to dine here with her children. No, Bartholomew; no, my boy; you shall have the same pocket-money as usual; you are much too good to be deprived of it."

Bartholomew absently took some halfpence which his mother offered to him, and as the latter was going to put the money away in her bedroom, he drew near his sister, and said to her with a heavy sigh,—

"Cecilia is not here."

"She will not come now," said the girl; "in half an hour it will be dark. But we will tell her all about it to-morrow. Come, go away upstairs and keep mother talking, as we agreed."

"Shall we wait a little longer?" asked Bartholomew.

"Wait? Then we shall not succeed in making mother leave the room."

"That is true," said the young man. "However, I should have been so glad for Cecilia to be here. Come, be quick, Jenny, and when it is done knock with the bellows on the tongs."

Janet ran in all haste to the stable, brought the basket, laid on the table five or six plates, on to which she emptied the packets of sugar-candy; arranged everything close to the half unfolded handkerchief, put the flowers into a small beer jug,

and placed by the side three drinking cups, for there were no glasses in the house.

Then she knocked with the bellows on the tongs so loudly, that her mother called out from upstairs,—

"I say! don't break anything down there!"

Bartholomew came down four steps at a time; his mother followed him.

It was a singular but touching picture to see the eyes of this good woman, full of surprise, as they wandered from the table, so well adorned, to her smiling children, and looked everywhere in a questioning manner, as if seeking an explanation of all these beautiful things.

"Long live mother! long live mother!" exclaimed Bartholomew and his sister; and transported with joy they flew to their old mother's neck, and gave her more than one loud kiss, full of love.

The young peasant was the first to disengage himself from this embrace; he took the new handkerchief, put it on his mother's shoulders, ran to take a small looking-glass from the wall, and exclaimed,—

"Look! look! mother; that is your present! Now you won't go to church any more with that shabby handkerchief."

The mother only then understood what her children's delight meant. She was so touched that she

could not say a word, and, stupified with surprise, she looked fixedly at the handkerchief.

At last a tear escaped from her eyes, she drew her children to her bosom, and in her turn covered them with kisses.

"Oh, how good God is," she murmured in a low voice.

And whilst she still held her daughter in her arms, Bartholomew ran to the table, filled the three mugs with beer, and said in a loving and grave voice,—

"To your health, mother! May we long live together a life of love and virtue; may I continue in good health to work for my good mother; and may God give us His blessing here below and afterwards in heaven! Long live mother!"

He put the mug to his mouth, but stopped suddenly at an exclamation from his sister, who darted out, saying,—

"That is Cecilia down there! Oh, that is Cecilia!"

"Hurra! hurra!" cried Bartholomew with alacrity, and he also ran out of the house.

The mother was alone for an instant only, when her children re-appeared on the threshold with Cecilia.

But, alas, what a change had taken place in them! Their faces were sad and dejected, they walked with

their heads hanging, and looked at Cecilia from time to time with curiosity mingled with terror.

Cecilia advanced silently as far as the table, sank down on a chair, and began to sob and weep in such a manner that the others, frightened, looked at her trembling.

The mother was the first to approach the poor distressed girl, and said to her, taking her hand,—

"Good heavens, dear Cecilia! what has happened? Some trouble?"

She obtained no answer.

Bartholomew in his turn came near the girl, and exclaimed in a voice heartrending and full of tears,—

"Cecilia! Cecilia!"

Whether this appeal, coming from a loving heart, forcibly impressed the young girl, whether the very tears that she had shed had a little comforted her, she raised her head and answered in a feeble voice,—

"Oh! my dear friends, sorrow has deprived me of speech. Let me weep a little longer."

"Oh! Cecilia, Cecilia, you will kill me," exclaimed Bartholomew, quite beside himself. "What is the matter? Speak for the love of God!"

"Judge how unhappy I am," said the young girl; "this is the last time that you will see me!"

This unexpected revelation was responded to by a series of sorrowful exclamations.

"I can never come here any more," returned Cecilia, shedding a flood of tears; "I may no longer speak a word to any of you. And alas! alas! I must obey."

"You cannot speak to us any more?" asked the widow, in an astonished and incredulous voice. "Why? And yet we have done no harm to anyone."

"Oh! ask me nothing," said the girl in a supplicating tone. "I cannot speak about it."

Bartholomew's anger burst forth; he ground his teeth, he clenched his fists convulsively, and replied,—

"Oh, I thought as much. It is that serpent Matthew who has done it all. Look here, I am kind-hearted, I have never even hurt a frog;—but if this brute falls into my hands, and I do not tear his infernal head from his shoulders, then——"

His old mother put her hand on his mouth, and cut short his vindictive imprecation.

"Bartholomew," said Cecilia, imploringly, "if you have any friendship for me, drive these evil thoughts away. My uncle himself has commanded me. There is nothing to be done; it is my fate."

"Good heavens! I shall never see you again, then?"

and he laid his head on the table and began to weep bitterly.

"I shall never come here any more," Cecilia answered; "but when, alone and forsaken, I spend whole days in the old convent, oh, my friends, I shall always think of you, always. Only now do I know how much I love you all."

These last words were the crowning point to the desolation, and all, their hearts broken, melted into tears.

Suddenly Cecilia cast outside an anxious glance, and doubtless perceived something which filled her with great alarm, for she rose trembling, and hastily collected some things scattered on a cupboard.

"Oh, goodness," she said, "I had already forgotten. I came to take my sewing-cushion; good bye, good bye, I must go!"

Bartholomew turned round, struck with the uneasy tone of these words.

He also looked out, and suddenly the fire of anger sparkled in his eyes.

"There is the evil demon down there in the road! Get away, scoundrel, get away!"

He wished to pass out at the door, but his mother hung on his neck and held him back with all her strength, although he roared like a mad bull, and

tried to escape from the embrace that was detaining him.

In the meantime Cecilia had hurriedly drawn from her bosom a gold cross. She put the trinket into Janet's hand, and said to her,—

"I promised the widow of John the mason that I would assist her. I cannot do it. Here is a cross which came to me from my deceased mother. Let her sell it and buy bread for her children. Mother Anne, Bartholomew, Janet, my dear and kind friends, good bye. Think of me; pray to God, pray to Him to protect me. I shall suffer, waste away, die of grief for —"

Her voice died away; she went away sobbing, with her hands before her eyes.

A moment after the inhabitants of the Chapel Farm were weeping in silence.

The handkerchief was lying forgotten on a chair, and it was quite dark before any of them had recovered from their sad dismay, and had found any alleviation in their heartbreaking sorrow.

V.

As if Cecilia had been the angel whose presence at the Chapel Farm dispensed happiness and contentment, all joy had disappeared with her.

Bartholomew, the gallant and gay young man, was no longer to be recognised. During whole days he remained silent and thoughtful; he hung his head, weighed down by constant sadness; on his pale and dejected countenance might be read the martyrdom of his spirit, and the anguish of despair.

All his songs were forgotten, and if he still worked as formerly, his movements were slow and uncertain, like one whose mind, being absent, does not superintend the work of his hands. He scarcely retained sufficient consciousness of what passed around him to make from time to time a short, and but little encouraging, answer to his mother's consolations.

Thus, in less than two months, the pretty little farm became as silent, as solitary, as sad, as the miser's gloomy dwelling.

What was breaking the young man's heart was not so much Cecilia's absence as his ignorance respecting her fate. His imagination conjured up before his eyes a thousand terrible scenes; he beheld her sufferings, her tears, he heard her complaints and her lamentations. Sleep for him was like a watch full of sudden emotions, full of alarms, without a definite cause, which made him a prey to constant suffering and continual uneasiness. Enough of this might be perceived when, occupied with his work, he often began suddenly to tremble, to grind his teeth angrily, to raise to heaven a supplicating look.

The sense of powerlessness was gnawing at his heart like a voracious worm. Cecilia had begged him with so much earnestness to abstain from all interference; he had read in her face that a mysterious and terrible power forced her to submit; perhaps he would have brought unhappiness to her by seeking to take revenge on him who appeared to be the cause of her sorrows.

This last thought prevented his making any demonstration against Matthew, whatever might be the violence with which he sometimes felt his blood boil with anger, and his suppressed resentment rise to his head.

During the week Cecilia did not leave the old

convent, she did not even appear on the threshold of that gloomy habitation; but on Sunday she went to church with her old uncle and Matthew.

Already, for three consecutive weeks Bartholomew had stationed himself on the road which Cecilia must take. Each time, as soon as the young girl perceived him, she had lowered her eyes, and passed before him without even taking any notice of his greeting. If he could not obtain a single sign from Cecilia, Uncle John, by way of retaliation, cast at him irritated looks, and seemed to address to him terrible reproaches. Matthew darted on the young man indirect and mocking glances whilst taking Cecilia's arm, with a significant smile, and inclining his head towards her with an appearance of adulation; in a word, comporting himself towards her as if another sentiment than that of friendship authorised familiarity between them.

To tell how deeply this scene wounded the young man's heart would be impossible. Cecilia's paleness, the tears that he thought he perceived on her cheeks, were quite sufficient to make him suffer inexpressible pain; and yet Matthew's odious irony inflicted on him more cruel torment still.

Three times he had thus placed himself on the road to church, and three times he had gone away

to hide the floods of tears which escaped from his eyes in the silent depths of the pine wood.

Since then, the meeting with the inhabitants of the old convent inspired him with such a dread, that he no longer dared to watch for the girl's return, but from a great distance, and without being perceived.

The mason's widow alone knew how to cause a ray of consolation to penetrate sometimes into his dejected spirit. She was in no wise deceived as to the secret passion which was torturing the young man, and she knew how, with perfect tact, to touch those of his affections which were capable of vibrating to a sentiment of hope. She boldly pronounced the word *love*, and forced him to avow the trouble from which his spirit was suffering. This gave her the right freely to lavish consolation, by speaking to him incessantly of Cecilia, and making him hope that the friend from whom he was separated experienced for him the same sentiments.

Since Cecilia's sad farewell, the widow had displayed an activity which might well cause surprise. From early in the morning till late in the evening she was on foot with her child. If Bartholomew was working in the fields, in a little while she was near him, comforting him and causing him to catch a glimpse of smiling prospects, then she left him to

return an hour after and visit him again. If the young man chanced to pass by the old convent, he found the widow seated at the side of the road, as if she was keeping watch on the miser's dwelling. If he passed through the village, there he saw the mother and child trotting and running, whether it was fine or bad weather. If he stationed himself on Sunday to await Cecilia's passing from a distance, he saw the widow place herself in the middle of the road, and boldly ask alms of the young girl, although the miser signed to her, with irritated gestures, to get out of the way.

A sentiment of gratitude to Bartholomew and Cecilia probably incited the poor widow to these extraordinary exertions; perhaps, also, the hatred that she bore to the perfidious Matthew was a powerful stimulant to her activity.

And, in fact, on whatever occasion she encountered Cecilia's persecutor and Bartholomew's enemy, she fixed on his eyes a gaze so steady and piercing, she seemed to threaten and challenge him so boldly that, under the reiterated influence of this state of things, Matthew gradually came to fear the beggar, and to be convinced that she whom he had so often repulsed rudely, suspected his designs on Uncle John's property. What had he to dread from her? He did

not know, but that filled him with the more uneasiness. Further, he knew that in right of her husband the widow had a claim on a small part of the estate: that was the very reason for the brutality with which he had always conducted himself towards her.

This uneasiness, and Uncle John's visibly increasing weakness, caused him to urge his suit more impatiently, and to use every means to induce Cecilia to consent to become his wife. Now he showed himself a flatterer, kind, and promising her every happiness; now he became again wicked and cruel, he ill-treated the poor girl, and endeavoured to convert her to his project by terror, and even by the fear of death. But whatever means he employed, forcibly as by the vilest calumnies he excited her uncle's mind against her, the young girl persisted in her refusal, and the greater part of the time shut herself up in resigned silence, so that her uncle accused her of culpable obstinacy.

One morning, Cecilia was seated near the chimney-piece holding a piece of cloth that she had begun to sew. However, she was not working; her unemployed hands were resting on her knees; her eye was fixed on the extinguished fire, and she was talking in a low voice to herself. Bartholomew's name and that

of her uncle fell at times from her lips with a deep sigh! But her face remained impassive, and as inanimate as a statue's.

Suddenly a sound of steps struck her ear; a deathly pallor overspread her features, and she began to tremble as if she dreaded a terrible apparition.

It was in fact Matthew who opened a door and entered the room.

Cecilia hung her head still more, as if she wished to hide her face: she made no other movement.

Matthew's countenance was contracted by a smile so cruelly wicked, that the girl's terror was really not exaggerated.

He drew near to Cecilia without speaking, under the apparent pretext of seeking for something on the hearth with the tongs, and trod so heavily on the girl's foot, that a painful shudder ran through her whole body. Still she did not say a single word. He raised his shoulders on a level with Cecilia's head, and pushed them violently in her face, without any complaint escaping from the mouth of his victim. On the contrary, she cowered down on her chair, and made herself small, like one who expects to suffer, and accepts punishment with the resignation of impotency.

After having ill-treated in a thousand ways the

young girl whose unresisting body seemed an inanimate thing, Matthew exclaimed, in a rough tone,—

"There you are, like a log of wood. Get out of my way!"

Saying these words, he pushed her so violently by the shoulders, that her head struck against the mantel-piece.

Quite silently she resumed her former position; but this time she began to shed a flood of tears.

The brute withdrew two or three steps, crossed his arms, and said, contemplating her with a sneer,—

"I told you, yesterday, that this should be your last day. Remember! There is nothing horrible that you need not expect, if the sun sets to-day before I have your consent."

And as the girl remained still and silent, his rage became more active.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "you are silent. It is the last show of strength that remains to you. Everything must be annihilated in you. I know the means to untie your tongue. Come, speak!"

He sprang towards Cecilia, grasped her shoulders in his muscular hands, and shook her so violently that the girl's head turned round; he fixed on her eyes a gaze full of ferocity, and the poor child, in fear of death, began to tremble in every limb.

"Speak," said he, in a thundering voice, "or I will break your shoulders between my hands."

A smothered cry escaped from the victim's breast. She sank on her knees, and said in a supplicating tone, holding out her hands towards her tormentor,—

"Oh, Matthew, what harm have I done you? If I must die, don't kill me by inches!"

The wretch contemplated the girl who knelt trembling at his feet with a kind of voluptuousness.

"I told you truly," replied he, with a sardonic smile, "that one day you should kneel before me. You thought the thing impossible, and there you are!"

"Pardon! mercy! I will do everything you wish; I will become the slave of your smallest wishes; I will obey a sign from you; I will be your servant."

"That is not what I want."

"I will renounce my share in the estate in your favour; I will also beg my uncle to give it to you; and if it is necessary, I will sign in the presence of witnesses, writings which will put you in possession of everything. But for the love of God give me a little respite, leave me for a moment in peace. My head is going—I feel—I am afraid—I am going mad."

Her head hung down on her chest, but she remained kneeling.

"That won't do," answered Matthew. "There is another means of making me the best man in the world. You know that means. To-day you are still free to choose it, to-morrow it will be too late. If you do not adopt it, you may bid farewell to the light of the sun; my hatred shall consume you by inches, sorrow shall wear you out slowly, you shall disappear like snow on the fire of my revenge. Oh, oh! you see, indeed, that you do not know me yet. Answer my question—will you be my wife; yes or no?"

The girl rose without uttering a word, reseated herself on her chair, and put her hands before her eyes.

"Cecilia," said Matthew, in a calm tone, likewise sitting down; "before deciding on the worst, I will once more invite you to be prudent. I really do not understand you. Sooner or later it is every girl's lot to marry. What matters the name of the husband, provided he be in a position to see to the maintenance of his wife, and to make her life pleasant? And you certainly cannot doubt my being able to do that. It is very true that in youth we imagine that love, beauty, affection, are things which are of value in life. These are all dreams, dreams which pass away with the folly of our early years. There is only

one thing which lasts always, a thing which holds the place of all, or, rather, which is the inexhaustible source of all others. That thing is called *money*. Well, we shall have money in abundance. Why then be so sad? Because love, sympathy, affection will be wanting at our marriage? What value can a pail of water have for him who is master of the source whence it flows unceasingly? You do not answer me? I understand that it is not the lack of love which holds you back, it is the hatred that you bear me. But what is hatred? An illusion, a sentiment which, like love, springs up and dies away with its cause. You hate me because I hurt you. Marry me, I will show you kindness; your hatred will disappear with the reason which made it grow in your heart. What do you say to that? Must I be angry again, and tear the words from your mouth by force?"

At this question, put with the gloomy emphasis of a threat, the girl began to tremble afresh.

"Oh, forgive me," she answered, in a voice full of entreaty; "I cannot tell a lie. It comes, do you see, because I pass my whole days here in solitude, thinking, dreaming, and suffering. The soul then sees farther, and discovers things that in other circumstances it would not have sounded. Do you know what marriage is?"

"It is the union of two people who join their lives together in order to derive greater advantage," said Matthew. "Neither more nor less than two merchants who join their money together to be able to make a larger business."

"Would to God it were so," said Cecilia, sighing. "Perhaps then I could yield to your wish."

"It is nothing else, believe me," said Matthew, interrupting her.

"No, no; it is the annihilation of the woman," replied the young girl, with singular energy; "an annihilation commanded by God, dictated by the sentiment of duty, by inexorable necessity. Now that I am not married, I enjoy, notwithstanding all, a certain liberty. I have my own will; I can resist you without sinning against God, and against my conscience. If your persecutions make me die of grief, I shall, perhaps, find my reward in heaven. Married to you, become your wife, I must be satisfied with your smallest wishes, submit myself to your smallest fancies, obey you like a slave. This is what appals me in the thought alone of what you ask of me."

This reply seemed to cause Matthew profound surprise, not so much in its actual meaning, as on account of the serious and quiet manner in which

Cecilia had spoken. He felt actually spiteful at still meeting with so much strength and firmness in her whom he believed quite worn out and exhausted in courage. After having remained an instant under this impression he answered, with his evil smile,—

"I understand; in fact, you judge of things from the foundation. You would be capable, if you accepted me, of refusing my embraces. What childishness!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Cecilia, in despair; "your embraces—your embraces would kill me! And if I could survive such frightful misery a single day, I should detest myself still more than I can detest you."

Matthew rose, and casting on the girl a ferocious look,—

"Thus," he asked, "you prefer another death, a slow death like that of one who is killed by pin pricks."

He received no answer, and remained some length of time plunged in his own reflections. At last he resumed in a careless manner,—

"Very well; I have no longer any hope of making you hear reason. I shall attain my end in another way. I shall still, perhaps, find it necessary to make you feel a little whether my fingers are flesh or iron,

but there is no further need this morning; I shall reserve my powers for the afternoon. In the meantime reflect on what marriage is; it will, perhaps be useful to you in the other world."

Saying this he went to the threshold of the outer door, looked in all directions, and murmured to himself,—

"The odious widow is not there; let us be quick."

He re-entered the room, and, with a threatening fire in his eyes, said to Cecilia,—

"I must go out for a moment. Bolt the door on the inside. Perhaps Frans Dalinck will come to pay his rent. Let him wait, and if you dare to open the door to anyone else—"

He raised his hand, drew in his fingers like talons, and making a gesture as if he were going to seize Cecilia by the neck, he added, his lips moving with fierce hatred,—

"You understand me!"

After which he left her trembling, and went away from the house by the road leading to the village.

Scarcely had he gone out than Cecilia rose, pushed the bolt, re-entered the room, and knelt down in a dark corner, her hands joined, and imploring fervently the protection of God.

A mournful silence reigned around her. In this

complete solitude her heart grew calmer, she began to weep, and her prayer was interrupted by mournful sobs.

Sometimes the wind blew hard in the chimney, or some creaking was heard in the old building. Then Cecilia, trembling, turned towards the door, and her face became pale with terror. Each time she resumed her interrupted prayer.

Suddenly she heard a light knock at the door, so low and so unobtrusive that her ear scarcely perceived it. She rose, however, and approached the door. The knock was repeated.

"Who is there?" said Cecilia, in a low voice.

"Cecilia, are you alone?" was asked through the key-hole.

"Ah, dear Catherine," answered the young girl, who recognised the voice; "for the love of God go away. Keep away from our door."

"You are alone! Let me come in, let me come in!" said Catherine, in a supplicating voice.

"I cannot. Oh, go away. I tremble at seeing you here."

There was a moment's silence. The voice outside soon resumed in a plaintive tone.

"Oh, Cecilia, my poor little Mary is lying here at

your threshold, dying of hunger; one little piece of bread may save her, and you, Cecilia, you would not give me that piece!"

The girl, without thinking how much of truth or of pretence there might be in this lamentation, began trembling, and looked earnestly at the lock of the door, extending her hand to open it; but she stopped terrified, as if the bolt would have burnt her.

"Quick, oh quick," said the voice outside; "she is dying, she is dying!"

Cecilia drew back the bolt with feverish haste, and half opened the door; the poor woman, who was on the watch for this move, entered the house by force. Seeing that Cecilia looked at her in a surprised and questioning manner, and fearing lest an exclamation should escape her, she laid her hand on the girl's mouth, and said to her in a low voice,—

"Silence, my child, she is at the Chapel Farm, very well, and in good hands. I deceived you; it was necessary that I should speak to you. Where is your uncle? upstairs? Let us speak low, he must not hear us."

"Oh, go away, leave me; Matthew will return directly," said the girl, shivering with fear.

Catherine went to the cupboard, took from it a loaf, like one who knew the place, and cut off a

small piece. She closed the cupboard, returned to Cecilia, and said,—

"This is what you have given me, and don't tell him anything else. I have seen him, he has gone to the notary. Don't entreat me to go away. For three months I have waited for such a moment; in order to take advantage of it I have watched the convent every day, from morning till evening. I want to know what is going on here. Matthew has not gone to the notary without a purpose; it must be for serious matters which demand time. He will not return so soon. That, too, I will discover. You are as pale and thin as a corpse. What is going on here, that causes you to waste away?"

"Catherine, my dear Catherine, I cannot tell," answered the young girl.

"You cannot tell?" repeated the poor woman, bitterly. "What are you afraid of? Death is in your eyes already. Ah, he has forbidden you to speak? He wishes to make you die of weakness; it matters little to him how he succeeds in making himself master of your share of the inheritance. And you, broken down by long suffering, thanks to your fears, you would let him triumph? Do you think that God would not be angry at seeing you ensure success to the designs of a wicked man against yourself? You

might, perhaps, reply that you are the mistress of your own life. But if your death is to cause that of another one, who, pining away from love to you—"

"Good heavens! Good heavens!" cried Cecilia, in a heart-rending voice, "is Bartholomew ill?"

"Dare you ask, Cecilia?" replied Catherine. "So you have not thought about him? You do not grieve at no longer seeing him?"

The young girl sank on to a chair and melted into tears.

"Catherine," said she, sobbing, "perhaps I am doing wrong in allowing you to read my heart. Oh, I have suffered more than he—he, at least, sees the sun, the fields, the light; he hears friendly voices; he has a mother; and *I*—I hear nothing but blasphemous imprecations, and his name, when it escapes my lips in solitude; and *I*—I see nothing but the four bare walls of my prison, and his image floating before my troubled eyes."

A smile of joy illuminated Catherine's face; she took the girl's hand tenderly, and asked,—

"You love him then, Cecilia?"

The girl hung her head to hide the blush which tinged her cheeks.

"Oh, tell me, Cecilia, tell me that you love him?"

"I cannot, Catherine; you would not keep the secret of my heart."

"But, Cecilia, if by that I could save some one's life?"

"Oh, let him know then what I have not yet dared to own to myself. His absence is my greatest sorrow, and if I must die I shall remember him when I am with God."

Catherine rose, half opened the door, and looked far away over the country. She came back and resumed,—

"I do not yet see Matthew. Take courage, Cecilia; rebel against him; he is a coward."

"Catherine, is it then true that Bartholomew is so ill?"

"Ill, no," answered the beggar, "but pale, thin, and languishing, like you. He is near enough to the grave to die if nothing comes to comfort him. But now I have balm for his wound. Tell me, dear Cecilia, tell me very quickly what has been going on here during these last unhappy months?"

"Listen, Catherine, you promise not to repeat anything to anybody, do you not? And yet, as you say, what is there worse than death? Matthew wishes me to become his wife."

"I thought so," murmured Catherine.

"My uncle commands it every day. I would rather die a thousand times! There are no persecutions that I have not to submit to. I am calumniated, abused; I am suffering from hunger; I succumb to anxiety and terror, and— But for the love of God, Catherine, do not tell this to Bartholomew, I am ill-treated, struck, tortured like a wretched animal."

"Good gracious! what are you telling me?" exclaimed Catherine, raising her hands to heaven. "Are you then in a cut-throat place? Heaven preserve me from it! I tell a word of it to Bartholomew? He would shed blood, unhappy boy. And your uncle? Has your uncle lost his head?"

"My uncle! poor man, he is deceived, imposed upon. Everything I say appears to him lying and deceit; he is bewitched, Catherine. If I could only speak to him—to him alone; but he spends whole days upstairs, in the farthest part of the house, shut up and inaccessible even to Matthew himself. If he comes down to eat, Matthew is always there, and he can so distort my words that everything I say, everything I do, puts my uncle in a passion, as if nothing but deceit, imposition, and calumny came from my mouth. Often I have myself doubted whether I did not say bad things, or whether I was not mad. Lately I have

submitted to my fate; I suffer in silence, I bow my head, thinking that this slow death has been reserved for me by God."

"It is frightful," said Catherine. "Why do you not fly from this hell and these demons?"

"Ah, dear Catherine, more than once when an unheard of terror has made me shudder in the expectation of worse treatment still, more than once I have looked at the door, but—"

"Weakness, cowardice!" exclaimed Catherine, in a short and peremptory manner.

"But my uncle? Ought I to leave him alone, hidden within these walls, to Matthew's cruelty and perfidy? And then the shame! A girl who flies from her home."

She was silent. Catherine had risen to go and look out at the door.

"He is coming down there," she said calmly, regaining her place. "If he sees me, tell him of the piece of bread that you gave me out of pity. Do not lose courage, I will come to your assistance, and if I am not here in time, fly from this house which God has cursed."

Terror had regained possession of the girl; one might see that Matthew's return had awoke her from a dream. She trembled, she held out her hands

towards the poor woman, she said, in a voice full of entreaty,—

"Oh, go away! go away! He will ill-treat you!"

"I do not fear him," Catherine answered, "be calm, dear Cecilia, you shall see me again."

The poor woman left the house with slow steps. Arrived before the door she observed that Matthew had perceived her, and that on that account he was running more quickly towards the house. She withdrew two or three paces, and paused, saying to herself,—

"Perhaps he is going to ill-treat Cecilia; but I will go and listen at the keyhole to what takes place."

She soon saw Matthew leave the path and take another direction, in order to reach the place where she was. She waited for him calmly.

As he drew near he began uttering a thousand threats against the widow; but she received him with so provoking a smile, and cast at him such a scornful look, that he stopped suddenly.

"Who opened the door to you?" exclaimed he, trembling with passion. "What were you going to do at the convent?"

"All sorts of dreadful things," said Catherine, in a mocking tone. "I begged for half-an-hour for a piece

of bread, and Cecilia gave it me. Everybody is not so hard as you."

"Shew me the bread," said Matthew, in an imperious tone, which proved that he did not believe what she was saying.

The widow held out to him the piece of bread. He turned it over and over two or three times, and returned it to Catherine, saying to her,—

"It is all the same, don't come to our house any more, or you will repent it."

"I laugh at your threats," answered Catherine, in a determined manner. "You can do nothing to me. But *I*—I, the poor beggar, shall indeed know how to find you out some day."

"You!" exclaimed Matthew, beside himself with anger, raising his hand as if he wished to strike her. "Not a word more, or I will break your neck."

Catherine extended her hand towards a field where three or four labourers were working.

"Do you see yonder?" she said. "All those men love me, and detest you. Touch me with the end of your finger only, and I will cry out murder. Witnesses will not be wanting to tell that you are capable of worse still. Therefore, if you don't like gendarmes, keep a watch over your hands."

Matthew shivered with anger and spite, but he kept

still and looked stupidly, and even with a kind of terror, at the poor woman, whose ironical smile continued to defy him.

She resumed,—

"Ah! you think you are alone, malicious man! Very possibly you may be deceiving yourself. You imagine that nothing is known of what is going on at the old convent? Is it to-day or to-morrow that Uncle John is to sign his will?"

"What? what are you saying?" exclaimed Matthew, surprised and disconcerted. "It is not true!"

"It is not true? and you are standing there like a schoolboy who is going to have the cane! But take good care what you do; each must have his share. If you close the convent doors the law can open them."

"The law? the law? What right can the law have to do what you say?"

"Listen, Matthew. You know as well as I, that where there is no right, one is being forged. And now, good bye, till we meet again."

She left Matthew quite stunned, and pursued her way with bursts of laughter.

He, profoundly agitated, followed her some time with his eyes; then, quite absorbed by his thoughts, [illegible]ned the road to the convent. On the way he

stopped again several times, put his finger to his forehead, stamped, and was so pre-occupied, that he crossed the room in which Cecilia was without appearing to observe her.

He passed through by a second door, and disappeared into the recesses of the building.

VI.

THE next day the sun rose majestically in a cloudless sky.

It was already the middle of the month of May; until now there had been but few fine days; the trees and fields had so slowly arrayed themselves in their spring clothing, that the transformation was scarcely perceived. But during the night the wind had changed from north-west to south. From that central point of heat and light came a warm and balmy current, to reanimate the torpid earth. The sweet light of the sun was shining over joyous nature. It was a day as fresh, as charming, as a young girl, whose head adorned with a bridal wreath, is, ready to approach the altar. From every tree, from every shrub, rose voices; the skylark soared singing, with throat dilated, into the azure heaven; a thousand little creatures of every form and colour hummed in the foliage, or sported in the springing grass. The very soil swarmed with life. It was the birthday of all nature!

The sun shed over the Chapel Farm too, his rays of

joyous light; there too the birds were singing of the happiness of life and the sweetness of love; but in the midst of this revival and gladness, the solitary habitation remained silent and sad, as if it alone, with its inhabitants, was still shrouded in the icy sleep of winter.

Mother Anne was seated by herself near the hearth, and was engaged in cleaning vegetables. She bestowed but little attention on her work; her eyes often wandered into space, vague and expressionless, as if she were absorbed in sad thoughts; and, in fact, her face evidenced deep grief and even bitter dejection.

Whilst the good woman was attending, dreamy and pensive, to her domestic task, Bartholomew entered with a spade in his hand. He was, doubtless, fatigued with laborious work, for he walked with bent back, and slow and heavy steps, without greeting his mother, without heeding her, as if he had not perceived her.

The latter followed her son with her eye, sadly struck with the young man's forgetfulness. He had scarcely disappeared by the back door, when silent tears escaped from the eyes of the sorrowing mother, whose head bowed lower over her work.

A few moments after Janet entered with a pitcher of milk in her hand.

She rested the pitcher on the ground, and was going to raise the lid of the saucepan used for the

cows, but she was arrested by seeing tears on her mother's cheeks.

Great impatience was depicted on her features; she went to her mother, took hold of her by the arm, and shook it, saying, in a sorrowful voice,—

"Again! It is always the same. If this goes on you will soon be on a sick bed, both of you, and will leave all the work on my back. If I did not keep up, what would happen?"

As she received no other answer than a paroxysm of tears, she resumed in a beseeching voice,—

"Come mother, give over, I entreat you. Really there is no reason for such sadness all day long. Bartholomew never speaks, he comes and goes like a shadow; you, as soon as you are left alone, begin to cry. To speak frankly, mother, it is not reasonable, or else there must be something underneath that I do not understand. Nobody tells me anything, one would believe that I am repulsed."

Poor mother Anne seized her daughter's hand and pressed it tenderly, as if to make her feel that she had lost none of her affection. Then she said to her in a plaintive voice,—

"Janet, my dear child, do you not see that your brother is wasting away? Do you not see how wild his eyes are, how thin and pale he is getting? And when

"Come, mother, give over, I entreat you. There is no reason for such sadness."

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you look at him, does not the fear that a greater trouble still may be coming make you tremble sometimes?"

"Good heavens, mother!" exclaimed Janet anxiously, in her turn wiping away the tears which gathered in her eyes, "what do you mean now by that? Bartholomew is sad, he is certainly getting thin, but I know well enough why. Such sorrows may indeed cause a man to droop a little; but by degrees a person ends by being cured. What, too, was he about, thinking of Cecilia? She was not his equal after all; for we are poor people, who, like slaves, must earn our bread from day to day; and she is rich, or will be some day. Why do you not scold him, so as to get this folly out of his head? But no, you weep and let him have his own way. Oh, if I were his mother!"

"My child! my child!" said mother Anne, sighing, "if you knew all that I have done to try and recall him to reason! I have scolded, entreated, wept; but reprimands, prayers, tears, all have been useless. He owns his fault; he would willingly forget her; he says I am right in everything; he throws himself at my knees and begs my pardon!"

"And you, mother, you forgive him quickly enough, do you not?"

"And I, dear Janet, I who am his mother, I see

clearly what is passing in my poor child's heart. You cannot understand it, Janet; one person is not made like another. I myself should not know, perhaps, if once in my life already I had not seen, what love is capable of when it is crossed. Bartholomew is nervous like your father. Well, would you believe, Janet, that your dead father, when he was still a young man, was at the point of death because our parents had separated us from one another, and he could no longer see me?"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Janet, anxiously.

Then, returning to her theme, she added,—

"Nevertheless, he recovered from it, did he not, mother?"

"He recovered, indeed, Janet, but how? Our parents were quarrelling about the use of a path in a field; they were so offended, all so angry, that they could not bear one another. I was no longer allowed to see your father, and he who loved me more than I knew myself, began to waste away, so that he took to his bed. Heaven be praised, the curé, who came to see him, took pity on the poor young man, reconciled our families, and I was able to visit my poor dying friend. The tears come into my eyes when I think of that day. I will not talk of it. But a month after he was able

to go to church with our parents to make me his wife."

Janet fixed two glistening eyes on her mother.

"You see," Janet continued, "Mother Anne, your father was a poor peasant as we are still; but be sure there was something more in him than in many others, and it might well be the same with our Bartholomew."

The young peasant girl shook her head in a meditative manner, and fixed a thoughtful gaze on the ground.

After some moments, she raised her head again, and began to speak,—

"It is singular," she said, "that any one can pine away from love for a person because they are nervous! I can scarcely believe it. But our father was in the same position as you, mother; in this way it might, indeed, happen. But between Bartholomew and Cecilia it is quite another thing; it can never end well, and that is why he ought to get rid of these foolish notions."

Mother Anne had fallen into deep thought; she was not listening to what Janet said, and her eyes expressed gloomy despair. After a short silence, she replied, sighing, as if she was speaking to herself,—

"He suffers like a martyr! Yesterday Catherine

told him something which made his eyes sparkle with delight; but she also added something else which made him grind his teeth with anger. Last night, whilst he was asleep, he talked, wept, shrieked. I listened to him, trembling. This morning he is quite cast down, paler still than yesterday; his eyes are wild. Alas, alas! my poor Bartholomew, my unhappy child!"

At the moment that these last words escaped from her mouth, and resounded through the room like a heart-rending wail, Bartholomew re-entered by the back door with a rake in his hand. Struck by the tone of his mother's voice, he stopped, and fixed a piercing look on the eyes of the weeping woman. Then he went slowly to her, put his lips to her forehead, dropped two scalding tears, and said in a low and almost unintelligible voice,—

"Poor, darling mother! oh! forgive me; I cannot help it."

And turning away, his head hanging down, and his hand before his eyes, he went out of the house.

In the splendid sunlight, in the midst of the universal gladness of surrounding nature, Bartholomew did not raise his head. Insensible to all, he crept along the path, his back bent like an old man,

who bows down under the weight of years. It might even have been supposed that whilst walking he was trying to find something in the grass.

From time to time he stopped, murmured some inarticulate words to himself, tore a leaf from the hedge, crushed it in his hand, and returned to the road still muttering; or else he stopped to contemplate, with a steady and absent eye, the little creatures which joyously chased one another, and sported on the ground; or else, again, he stripped off the leaves of a flower, or listened dreamily to the reciprocal call of the birds.

What all this was saying to him, perhaps he himself did not know. However, he felt extremely agitated, and fell into a deep reverie, until rousing himself, as with a start, he began again to pursue the footpath with slow steps.

Suddenly, as if a more powerful thought had taken possession of him, he stopped abruptly, and his eye fixed dreamily on before, he murmured in a voice full of tears,—

"Since yesterday, Cecilia, I know what you are suffering! Oh! you are ill-treated, struck, tortured. You are worn out with suffering. And yet you—you love me still. Oh! how cowardly and weak sorrow makes one! More courage, more strength! I am in dread,

I am afraid, I don't know what to do, I lose myself, my mind is troubled—I am ill."

A sad and bitter smile passed over his pale face.

"Ill? ill?" he exclaimed. "Yes, in this way hide your cowardice. But if I had courage and strength? Leave her to die—she who loves me? Oh! that would be a crime! But—but what then? Assassinate him—*him?*"

At this thought he leaped back as if he had seen the gaping mouth of a viper in the grass. A low cry of repulsion and horror burst from his throat, he exclaimed,—

"Oh! God is above! My salvation—my mother! No! no! I must submit, waste away with grief, bear the cross, bear it even to the grave. Alas! alas!"

And he resumed his walk staggering, dejected, pressing his forehead with both hands, as if he feared it might burst.

Whilst the unfortunate young man, in a state of dreadful despair, was wandering along the shaded path, and, without perceiving it, gradually approaching the old convent, a scene was being enacted in the miser's dwelling, even more terrible than Bartholomew would have ventured to suspect.

The convent door opened. On the threshold appeared a young girl, pale and thin, holding a heavy

parcel in one hand—and with the other covering her tearful eyes.

A man with a hideous laugh pushed her two or three steps from the door. There the girl paused an instant, as if she resolved with difficulty to quit the place. However, upon a threatening order from the man, she set out slowly, and walked on until a group of oak-trees hid the convent from her sight.

Then, whether the heat of the sun and the cheerful light which surrounded her; whether the voices of rejoicing nature caused a reaction in her nervous system, she stopped and let her hand fall. Her surprised and delighted gaze was arrested by the deep azure of the sky, rounded in an arch above her head, and wandered with increasing delight over all creation. An indefinable smile was gradually depicted on her face, her bosom swelled, her head became erect on her delicate neck, her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm; she raised her face towards heaven and sighed in a low and deeply agitated voice,—

"Free! free!"

And she extended her arms as if she would have liked to enclose in them all space.

She remained some time in a state of ecstasy, until her eyes had caressed and enjoyed all that was within their range. Then, insensibly, she returned to the

consciousness of herself. Her head fell back slowly on to her chest, the smile gave place to an expression of sadness; she fixed her eyes on the ground and began to meditate on her miserable lot.

An instant after she left this place, and dreamily followed the path. Suddenly, at the turning by a clump of trees, an exclamation of surprise burst from her bosom,—

"Bartholomew!"

The young man all trembling stood before her.

At this unexpected meeting a delighted smile brightened the face of each; but at the same time they looked at one another with an expression of sadness and terror. Both, without speaking a word, hung their heads and wept bitterly.

The young man raised his eyes first, and said in a complaining voice,—

"Cecilia, poor Cecilia! how thin and pale you are!"

"And, you, Bartholomew, I hardly know you!" answered the girl sobbing, and without looking up.

"I?" said the young man, despairingly. "What does it matter! But you, Cecilia; you, goodness itself; you, an angel in this world, that you should suffer thus. That, like a lamb, without complaining, should be condemned to die by the hand of that

hypocritical scoundrel! Oh! it is enough to make one gnaw one's knuckles till the blood comes. God help me! or I may break the head of the venomous brute. But, Cecilia, what is that parcel? Where are you going?"

"I have been turned out!" answered the girl, shedding fresh tears.

"Turned out!" exclaimed Bartholomew, his face purple with anger and indignation.

But this first emotion soon disappeared. The expression of his features slowly changed into that of an ever-increasing joy, until understanding the full bearing of the news that he had just learned, he exclaimed,—

"Turned out? for always?"

"For always," affirmed the young girl, in a sad voice.

"And you are weeping, Cecilia!" said the young man, buoyantly. "What! you have suffered for months in a dark prison! a brute has struck you, made you suffer martyrdom even to death! Oh! at the moment when we despaired—when nothing could deliver us but the grave—God has set you at liberty! You are free—free, and you weep! Oh! see, see, what I do!"

He threw himself on his knees, raised his hands

towards heaven, and looking upwards with an earnest gaze, he exclaimed,—

"Oh! my God, Who hast delivered her, I thank Thee—I thank Thee from the bottom of my heart for Thy mercy!"

His voice died away, but he remained on his knees, murmuring in a low voice a prayer, perhaps more fervent still.

The girl looked at him with surprise and admiration. He was so beautiful kneeling thus, his generous soul portrayed on his features, his bright and tearful eyes raised to God. Such fervent gratitude beamed on his face that Cecilia, trembling with emotion, forgot her position, and experienced unutterable joy.

When at the end of his prayer, the young man slowly rose, he observed a serene expression on Cecilia's face, which was not a smile, but something indefinable which announced the calmer happiness of the mind.

Bartholomew took the girl's hand, saying to her,—

"Let us go! let us go: my poor mother will be so pleased! Let us go, it is so pleasant at home. Your chair is always in the same place; no one has sat in it yet. Everything languishes, waiting for you. Let go quickly!"

Cecilia resisted, and was unwilling to follow him in the direction in which he was trying to lead her.

"Cecilia, what does this mean?" asked Bartholomew. "Will you not come to our home?"

"I am going to the town," she answered. "I have a cousin there who is a dressmaker and will give me work, so that I can earn my bread."

"Your bread?—work? Oh, what does it mean?" Bartholomew exclaimed. "Now that I can see you, read your eyes, hear your voice—now my zeal will be doubled; and if I work like four, we shall live in abundance. Come! oh, come!"

"For the love of God, Bartholomew, do not ask me that; it is impossible," said the girl, heaving a profound sigh.

The young man questioned Cecilia's eyes with sorrowful surprise.

"My dear Bartholomew," she resumed, "you may be sure it is impossible."

As if a revolution had taken place in his mind, discouraged he let his head fall on his chest, and said, in a tone of mournful resignation,—

"Joy was misleading my disordered mind; I had forgotten. You are right, Cecilia, I am a poor peasant: you will be a rich young lady some day. It only remains for me to die."

These last words were pronounced in so heart-broken a tone that they went to Cecilia's heart and overcame her maidenly reserve. She seized the young man's hand, pressed it in her own, and answered in a voice full of tenderness,—

"Bartholomew, my friend, you are deceiving yourself; it is not so. My uncle has disinherited me: he has made a will, by which he gives everything he possesses to Matthew. I shall never possess anything."

The young peasant raised his head, and looked at Cecilia incredulously, whilst a smile was forming on his lips.

"Yes, yes, believe me, Bartholomew," resumed the girl; "I am poor now, like you."

"Poor, like me?" the young man said, with a wild joy on his face; "poor, like my mother, like my sister! Oh, heaven, what happiness! Well, leave the money to that bad man. I will give you riches, I, Cecilia. I will give you the treasures of friendship, of affection, of love. Come, come!"

He took the girl's hand again, and wanted to lead her forward; but she replied, sadly,—

"No, Bartholomew, it cannot be."

"But, why?"

A modest blush overspread Cecilia's face, and she replied, lowering her eyes,—

"Did not the widow of John the mason tell you anything yesterday afternoon?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Bartholomew, "she was then speaking the truth! I dared not believe it."

"What would the country people say of us, Bartholomew? I am sure you, too, understand that it cannot be."

"Then, Cecilia," said the young man, with the despondency of despair, "you are going to Antwerp —you are going to forsake us. Perhaps to meet with new sufferings, and to find yourself rebuffed and ill-advised. You will leave me to die, my poor mother to fall ill, for the opinion of the neighbours?"

He waited for an answer; but the girl, her eyes fixed on the ground, remained silent.

"Oh, Cecilia! you shall sleep in my mother's room, and you shall be always with her. I will surround you with respect and love, as if you were my guardian angel. I will work—I will work from early in the morning till late in the evening—nothing shall be wanting to your happiness. You will recover, you will regain health and strength; your presence will be, as formerly, a blessing to our house. Oh, come!

come, be the sister of my sister, the child of my mother."

With hands joined, he seemed to be imploring an answer. The girl looked at him undecided.

"Oh, Cecilia!" he exclaimed, "speak. Remember that there is One in heaven above mankind Who knows the evil-doers in the world."

A strange smile brightened Cecilia's face; she breathed with difficulty, like a person who is about to take an important resolution.

"Well, well?" asked Bartholomew, quite trembling with joyous expectation.

"Well," answered the young girl, "be it so. Let your mother be my mother: I will live under her roof as if I were her child."

A cry, sharp as an exclamation of pain, escaped from the young man's bosom; he put both hands to his eyes, and the tears streamed through his fingers.

Cecilia understood nothing of this violent emotion, and spoke consolatory words to Bartholomew.

"Oh," he answered, whilst a feverish smile shone through his tears, "joy also is painful! it breaks down the heart—it makes one mad. But it is over. Come, my friend, come."

They took another path. Bartholomew was quite changed. He walked now with his head erect, with

a proud look; the warm blood coloured his cheeks; the enthusiasm of happiness was shining in his eyes; his step was firm and light. Exclamations of joy crowded to his lips.

"My God, my God!" he said, "how beautiful life is! You see, Cecilia, I shall work like a slave in the fields, or I shall prepare hoops in the garden; you will make people's clothes, as formerly; Janet will take care of the cow; my mother will stay with you and cook. Each of us who earns anything will put it into the common purse, and thus we shall save a little. We will buy another cow, and we will rent more ground. And who knows—oh, dear, if that were to happen!—who knows, we shall end by taking a servant. Perhaps the little Chapel Farm will become so beautiful, and the blessing of God will rest so fully upon it, that you will no longer think of the ugly convent."

"Bartholomew, how well you speak," murmured the girl, touched; "that would be heaven on earth."

"It will be," continued the young peasant, with the same expansive joy. "I will plant all sorts of beautiful flowers in our garden: I will lay out paths and grass-plots: I will have cages full of birds to hang all round the house—everything must sing and be joyful. And then I will learn new songs—I will

tell tales—I will dance—I will jump, and I will thank God every day for having granted that you should come home to us. Good heaven! good heaven! what a life, dear Cecilia, what a life! Look down there, near the well—look! my mother and Janet."

At these last words he left the young girl, and ran towards the farm as quick as an arrow; still, all impatient as he was, he had yet strength to call out,—

"Mother! Jenny!"

The mother turned round at Bartholomew's voice, and with surprise saw him in full chase. Seeing his strange gestures, hearing his incomprehensible call, Janet, with her mouth open, looked from her brother to her mother, as if asking an explanation of this singular enigma.

But the good woman had no time to find words to express her emotion; her son leaped into the garden breathless, uttering cries of joy, quite beside himself.

"Mother, dear mother! Jenny, sister, I am cured! Laugh, sing, rejoice—here is Cecilia. She is coming—she has been turned out. She is poor like ourselves—she is disinherited—she is going to live with us. She will be your child, mother. Look, look, there she is! She is smiling already, the dear crea-

ture. Ah, now you will not weep any longer. I am so strong and so happy. Oh,—

> 'Away with dull sorrow, away with black care,
> For to-morrow will be the day of the fair.'"

The poor woman looked at her son with inexpressible joy. At first she had feared for his reason, but the sound of his voice no longer allowed her to doubt; besides, Cecilia was approaching the farm with quick steps.

The agitated widow and the happy Cecilia, with a simultaneous movement, extended their arms to one another. The young girl went straight to Mother Anne, and wound her arms round her neck. The kiss that the mother gave to her second daughter was as warm as heart could wish.

Janet danced, and clapped her hands, and exclaimed,—

"My goodness! this is nice, this is beautiful!"

Suddenly Bartholomew appeared to remember his trouble. As if he were afraid of something, he drew near his mother, and pushed her, Cecilia, and Janet towards the house.

"Come in! Come in!" he said.

They obeyed the young man's order.

Bartholomew was going to shut the door, but he

perceived Catherine, the beggar, passing along the road with her child. He put his head out of the open door, and made the widow an impatient sign to be quick.

The moment she set her foot in the garden, he called to her,—

"Quick, quick, Catherine, we are so happy. Cecilia is here—quick!"

And pushing her inside, he closed the door.

VII.

FROM the time that Cecilia inhabited the Chapel Farm, that humble dwelling became in reality the abode of comfort and happiness that Bartholomew had imagined in the first burst of his joy.

Everything there was peace and contentment. Bartholomew worked with spirit all day, and sang incessantly at his work; he recovered the quick energy of his youth; on his face the glow of returning health was joined to the brightness of a constant smile; every word which fell from his mouth breathed energy and vivacity; he was the very image of inward joy.

What gladdened him most was the conviction that Cecilia did not regret having taken up her abode at the farm. It is very true that she often still fell into mournful sadness whilst thinking of her uncle, and that she was terrified at the thought of what he had, perhaps, to suffer in the mystery of the old convent. But this sadness could not counterbalance the happiness given her by the tender affection of Bartholomew and his mother, nor the peaceful joys which surrounded her.

From her cheeks was gradually effaced the pallor which sorrow had imprinted there, and although she was of a staid and calm disposition, she still smiled from time to time with that serenity which indicates peace of heart.

Cecilia made clothes for the peasant girls of the village, and, as she was more expert in this task than others, her work brought her many a piece of money. This was a great pleasure to her, and this circumstance contributed not a little to encourage with her, as with Bartholomew, the hope of a future increase to the little farm. The money-box received only a few pence a-week, sometimes not even one, but sometimes also a piece of silver; however it might be, the savings increased, and when Bartholomew, in his mother's room, jokingly shook the little box where the profits of love and labour had just been mingled, it gave a most agreeable and promising sound.

The young man had spared nothing to embellish the maternal dwelling, and to make it pleasant and cheerful to the eyes of her he loved; he took an interest in and liking for everything within his reach. In the garden, which was at the back of the farm, he had marked out paths and grass-plots, which he had bordered with Spanish grass, always in flower. Quite at the bottom, against the beech hedge, he built an

arbour, which was shaded by honeysuckle and the five-leaved ivy, and on Sunday, after service, they came to sit there; they talked, they sang, they extolled in quiet converse the peaceful pleasures of life, and the inexhaustible goodness of God.

The garden was enamelled with flowers of every kind, and the humble plants which grew on the heath, and in the woods of the Campine, were mingled with those that have been imported from other countries. Frank, the under-gardener at the chateau, had given Bartholomew the latter.

Even on the walls of the house cages were suspended, whence resounded incessantly lively and joyous songs; pigeons, which came to eat from Cecilia's hand, had their lodging under the roof, and ran about in the roads with their crops full.

Janet had her share in all these rejoicings; she availed herself of them carelessly, and, like a child, she rejoiced in the happiness of others.

The old mother was cared for and loved; she saw happiness beaming in every look of her children, and she certainly would not have exchanged her lot with that of the lady at the chateau.

The Chapel Farm was indeed a paradise on earth.

It was not thus with the gloomy convent. Since Cecilia's departure, Uncle John's house had become

so empty and so desolate, that to see the building silent and disconsolate in the midst of trees, one would have thought that it had been struck with a divine malediction.

The labourers who worked in the neighbouring fields did not see the door opened once in two days. The mysterious dwelling, with its cracked walls and broken panes, inspired them with uneasy terror, and only the most courageous amongst them would have dared in the evening to take the road which was adjacent to it.

Two Sundays had already passed since Uncle John had been at church. To all those who inquired after the old man, Matthew answered that the gout obliged him to keep his bed.

Although it was known that Uncle John had suffered formerly from this malady, the truth of Matthew's explanation was nevertheless doubted. Besides, as Uncle John was hated on account of his avarice, no one appeared to be uneasy about him, except Cecilia only, who had wept bitterly at the news of his illness.

It was in the middle of the week, one morning early, Matthew was seated near the fire-place, where a pretty good fire was burning. He was holding a piece of meat in the tongs, to roast it over the

embers, and from time to time he dipped it in a plate where there was some melted butter. At the side of the hearth, in the burning ashes, a stone pot was smoking.

When the meat was sufficiently roasted, Matthew put it on the table, and devoured it with a smile of satisfied gluttony. He shut up the plate and the bread in the cupboard, wiped his mouth carefully, and returned to seat himself near the fire.

He drew some herbs from the boiling pot with the tongs, let them fall back into it, and said to himself,—

"Uncle John's stew looks good. And he fancies that that is going to cure him. As if the stomach allowed itself to be as easily deceived as the first fool one meets. What an ass the man must be who wrote the book where he finds such cookery! Chicory and water-cresses to put young flesh on old bones! And I must go and seek the cress—it would be enough to attract the attention of the neighbours. Bah! I have put in two handfuls of cochlearia, it is good for the scurvy. A coward even on his death-bed. But what does it matter to me? I am not here to thwart him. He will try and live without eating; well, the sooner he is accustomed to it the better it will be. I thought at first that he would not

have lingered so long; but he has a life as tough as a cat's."

He remained for a moment looking fixedly at the fire, and absorbed in thought. During this meditation his face gradually assumed a serious expression. Soon he muttered,—

"Yes, he has a life as tough as a cat's. Who knows how long this old lamp may still burn! And as for me, I am here like a fool. I am selling the skin of the bear before he is dead. This morning Farmer Claes told me that at the board of trade the burgomaster and the curé asked after Uncle John. And that wretched woman who goes chattering everywhere to excite people against me. She alone is the cause of the peasants' hatred for me. This morning I had not gone twenty steps outside the door to seek chicory in the field, than she was spying at me through the bushes. I don't know, but I believe that this beggar will serve me a bad turn. If the burgomaster and the curé should come here and see Uncle John! I have a will which makes me residuary legatee; everybody knows it; but who can tell what Uncle John might say? The curé, particularly, might put something else into his head."

This thought made him shudder. He kept silence

for an instant, his hand to his forehead, after which he resumed,—

"Come what may, no one must go near him! He is already beginning to have some very peculiar notions about what he has done, and then he talks incessantly of Cecilia. It would not take much to make the old fool change his mind. What must I do? Silence the neighbours; but how? It is my being so alone with Uncle John that inspires them with distrust. If Cecilia were still here people would not trouble themselves so much as to what becomes of the mean old fellow; but I am not so foolish as to shut the cat in the cupboard to take care of the meat. And yet the only means of quieting the curé, the burgomaster, and all those marplots who meddle in everything that does not concern them, would be to take some one into the house, apparently to run errands, but who, nevertheless, would not see Uncle John. Of two evils, one must choose the least. And then who? who take into the house?"

He began to think, shaking his head in a discontented manner. Finally, after a moment's reflection, a smile slowly expanded on his lips.

"What a notion," he said, "if it could succeed! It would cost me tolerably dear. A promise is equal to an obligation, say the simpletons, and then it is dan-

gerous. Let us decide nothing quickly, it must be maturely considered. Uncle John's herbs ought to be cooked. I will reflect seriously again on this plan. Better, they say, a prudent enemy than an unskilful friend. Perhaps the beggar will fall into the snare more willingly than I think. Come, I will take Uncle John his breakfast."

He took the pot from the fire, left the room, and pursued a dark passage ending in a staircase, which he ascended. Arrived at the first story, at the end of a long passage, was Uncle John's room: he entered.

The miserable old man was lying on a bed, whose dirtiness would have turned the stomach of the meanest beggar. Illness had wasted his flesh; his withered cheeks seemed only sustained by the bones; his eyes, deeply sunken, shone in their orbits with a glassy light; it would have been impossible even to call the livid complexion of his face pallor; it was the absence of all colour, a tone which has no name, and from which were detached, in dreary contrast, his bluish lips.

Everything in this miserable dwelling bore the stamp of desertion and destitution, everything in it oppressed the heart with inexpressible sadness. The high arched walls, which had not been touched since

the destruction of the convent, escaped the eye, hidden as they were under the black shade of dust and dirt. On the west side the wall was impregnated with brackish salts; water oozed out and ran through the flooring, even to the foundations of the building. On the approaches to this impure spring were growing a thousand mouldy and shapeless plants, and saltpetre hung its shining needles to the ceiling.

One single window, very high, with broken panes, grated with thick bars of iron, shed a dim light in the room, to which the eye was obliged to accustom itself before being able to distinguish anything in the half darkness, although outside the ardent heat of summer might, so to speak, have calcined the ground; here it was so cold and damp that one breathed with difficulty. Near the bed were a chair and a table; on the latter were a jug filled with water, and a crust of brown bread, still bearing the marks which teeth had imprinted in it. It might indeed, have been supposed that this was the dungeon of a prisoner condemned to die slowly of hunger.

Uncle John appeared to be asleep, but it could not have been the case, for at Matthew's entrance he hid under his bed-clothes, with a convulsive movement, something which made a sound like that of keys striking against one another.

Matthew saw the movement, and heard the noise; a cunning smile passed over his face, and he seemed to be straining his ear the better to catch the sound of the iron. Then he approached the bed, rested the smoking pot on the table, and said to the old man, in a very harsh voice,—

"Well, Uncle John, here is your food!"

The invalid made an effort to sit up, but after one painful attempt he fell back heavily on his bed.

"I am worn out," said he, sighing; "oh, my dear Matthew, last night was a very bad one to me!"

"I will help you," said Matthew, holding out his hands to him.

"Oh, no, no!" said the old man with anguish, as if he dreaded this assistance.

But Matthew paid no attention to his alarm, passed his hands under Uncle John's body, raised him abruptly, and leant him back, like a piece of wood, against the pillow.

"Oh, oh dear! you are hurting me," said the invalid, in a plaintive voice.

"I hurt you?" asked Matthew, with pretended pity; "if you are so sensitive what can I do? However, I must raise you, since you will not do it for

yourself. Come, it is done; eat a little, and don't burn yourself; it is still hot."

The old man took the spoon with a trembling hand, and picked up some leaves from the pot, saying,—

"My goodness, Matthew, if these herbs could comfort me a little, I am so weak and ill."

Matthew made no answer to this complaint, but he fixed a scrutinizing gaze on the old man. Although the scoundrel made an effort to conceal his feelings, a smile of glad surprise was depicted on his face; he was rejoicing at his uncle's evidently increasing weakness; his eyes brightened with the hope that it could not last much longer.

Uncle John had eaten one or two spoonfuls; he shook his head, let the spoon fall, and looked earnestly into Matthew's eyes, in a questioning manner, or expressive of reproach.

"Well, what is the matter?" Matthew asked.

The sick man answered with disgust,—

"For shame, how nasty it is; it burns my mouth like fire, and gives me the cramp in my stomach."

"Presently you will believe yourself poisoned," said Matthew, in a joking tone, "water cress always burns like that; it is that you cannot bear."

The old man put out his bare arm, and shew-

ing it to Matthew, said to him, in an entreating tone,—

"Look, Matthew, have you no pity for me? Look, I am a skeleton!"

"Come, come," answered the other, "cover up your arm. What does it matter? Who can feel more pity for you than I do? But illness makes you foolish. You don't wish any one to think you are going to die?"

"Am I not, then, very ill?"

"Ill, yes; but not as you imagine. You are still robust, Uncle John; thin people live to be the oldest; if this does not become worse, there is no danger."

"May you be telling the truth, Matthew!"

A moment's silence followed this despairing wish.

"Oh, I am so hungry," murmured the old man.

"Very well, eat," answered Matthew, thrusting the crust of brown bread into the invalid's hand.

"Matthew, I should like something else to eat; this bread disgusts me, it might be called sand."

"Well, what will you eat? In the book there are several other herbs that we can try."

"No, some meat—some meat soup. Oh, that must be good! I tremble when I think of it."

Matthew's face enflamed with passion. He restrained himself, however, and answered,—

"Meat, meat soup? It would be enough to increase your illness immediately, and to kill you at once. You who have not eaten it for so many years."

"Matthew, Matthew, for the love of God give me some meat."

"After that you must make your own choice. Give me some money, then; and if it causes your death, you are my witness that I have nothing to do with this imprudent gluttony."

"Money," grumbled the old man, "money! That is always the first and the last word."

He slipped his hands under the clothes, and appeared some time occupied, either in counting or in feeling some pieces of money. At last he held out his hand to Matthew, and said,—

"There, go and get a little meat."

"Oh, oh!" said Matthew, ironically, and looking laughingly at the piece of money, "a *stuiver*.* Some meat for a *stuiver!* it would be a fine piece. No one would give any for such a little. I must have twenty *cents*, or I buy no meat."

* A piece of money no longer in circulation, and which was worth the twentieth part of a florin. The name of stuiver is now used for pieces of ten centimes, which represent about the same value (five cents).

"Oh, heaven, twenty *cents!* Quite a little bit of meat cost twenty *cents?*" murmured the old man, in despair. "However, it is only for once. There, Matthew, there are fifteen *cents*, and bring me back the remainder. You will get it well for a *stuiver*, or, at least, for some *cents* cheaper. The bones, too, are good for soup, bones are not so dear."

"Very well," said Matthew, impatiently, "if there is anything over, I will return it to you."

He rose, and was going to leave the room, when Uncle John spoke to him again,—

"Matthew," he said, "I was going to forget to ask you something more."

"Not all yet?" asked Matthew, ill-temperedly.

"Oh, don't be so harsh to me," said the old man. "You see, Matthew, last night I was afraid I should die, and the agony of that fear threw me into a cold perspiration. Do you know why? If I had died without seeing the curé."

"Whatever is this notion?" exclaimed Matthew, with ill-concealed anxiety.

"Matthew, dear Matthew," said the old man, in a supplicating voice, "would it not be well for the curé to come, that I might prepare? for, who knows? God calls us to him so suddenly!"

There was no answer. Matthew, his arms crossed

on his chest, looked at the old man with astonishment.

"And Cecilia," resumed the latter, "Cecilia!" I should much like to see her once again before I die. She has behaved badly, she is wrong; but still I always dream of her, and must I not forgive her before appearing in the presence of God?"

"The more you talk, the better it is!" exclaimed Matthew; "indeed, I begin to think that you are altogether ill, not the body, but the brain. Cecilia makes game of you; she is living with her lover, and cares not for you. I asked her if she wished to see you, she answered me that you could very well set out for the other world without a visit from her."

The old man let his head fall on his chest, and wiped away two large tears.

"Be it so," continued Matthew, "summon the curé, summon the doctor, open your house to any one who likes to come in; but open your purse also to anybody who wishes to attack it. It will not be with *stuivers* that you will be let off: each visit, each word, will cost you florins."

"Oh! let us wait a little still!" said the old man, falling back exhausted on his bed.

"Till by-and-bye, then," said Matthew. "Take courage, you are not as ill as you think."

Saying these words he left the room, and went down stairs. He stopped a moment in thought near the fire-place, and said,—

"There, the shell is bursting! The curé, Cecilia, meat—to-morrow, the doctor; and the day after, the notary! Oh! he may call out as much as he likes, that won't help him. The old niggard is at my mercy, and no one can hear him. But if the people outside should wish to see him? If the curé himself wished to pay him a visit? There is only one means; the beggar-woman! But let us proceed carefully. And yet he cannot die without seeing the curé. I don't wish to have that load on my conscience. He might, after his death, witness against me. But there is still time to think about that. Ah! he would like to eat meat! and to recover! and to alter his will! To-day is Thursday: impossible to get meat. To-morrow is Friday, and I can't get it then—and, consequently, he will not require it any more. Come, let's go and find the beggar, and try what can be done with her. If that does not go on as I intend, I shall seek another expedient. Although this woman frightens me, with a little money and many promises, I shall, perhaps, succeed. That would take two obstacles out of my way: the ill-will of this woman, and the gossip of the neighbours; and

if she is trustworthy, she will be further an overseer during my absence. We shall see which is the sharper of us two."

Saying this, he left the convent, and locked the door on the outside.

"If Uncle John should wish to depart whilst I am at a distance," he muttered, "all would be at an end. But he will not have the spirit. Still, who knows? Everything is possible."

And talking to himself, he went on his way to the village.

Suddenly, in the distance, he saw Cecilia coming to meet him. He turned pale at sight of her, but recovered himself at the same moment.

The girl only perceived him when she was quite near him. Her face assumed an expression of entreaty; she advanced towards him, saying,—

"Oh, Matthew! I am so glad to meet you at last. Be so good as to tell me, frankly, how my uncle is."

The humble and affectionate tone of the girl re-assured Matthew as to her intentions; he answered without rudeness,

"Pretty well, Cecilia; he has the gout, it is the disease of the wealthy. Nobody dies of it, and he, too, will recover from it, although he has not left his room for some time."

"And does he suffer much?"

"Pretty well, pretty well; still a little."

Cecilia's eyes filled with tears.

"But you take good care of him, Matthew, do you not?" she asked. "He does not want anything that can ease or comfort him?"

"What should he want? he is contented," answered the other.

Cecilia's countenance became so beseeching that Matthew was quite astonished. He probably thought that she was wishing to show love for him, for he said,—

"Yes, Cecilia, if you had accepted my proposal, you would have been a lady one day. Now, it is too late; I am sole heir. That comes of your refusal."

"Matthew," said the young girl, giving to her face its most affable expression. "Matthew, may I ask you one thing?"

"Why not?"

"Will you grant it me, Matthew? I shall be so grateful to you."

"Let us know your request."

"It is very sad for me, Matthew, that I have not been able to see my old uncle once since his illness. You know how much I love him! Oh! let me go and see him; let me, for the love of God! I will pray for you, Matthew."

The knave shrugged his shoulders, and answered,—

"I, too, have thought about it, and if it depended on me you should even see him to-day, Cecilia."

"You see, Matthew, you have nothing to fear from me; even if you wished to give up the inheritance, I would not accept it. There are other ways of being happy in the world."

She joined her hands and added, eagerly,—

"Matthew, dear Matthew! oh! let me see him! Only for an instant; perhaps it will comfort him in his suffering."

"You are deceiving yourself," answered Matthew; "I, myself, have asked him twenty times, perhaps, if I should summon you to him; but, hitherto, my efforts have not been successful. He is so angry with you, that he cannot hear your name mentioned without going into a passion—and that is not good for the gout."

Cecilia, her apron to her eyes, wept and sobbed.

"Oh, heaven! what harm have I done him? He whom I still love as a father; he whom I see incessantly in my dreams! To be angry with me, to hate me! I, who since my departure have not shed a single tear which was not for him! If he knew the love I bear him, he would not refuse me so cruelly."

"What I tell you is indeed true, Cecilia," said Matthew; "but old people have strange fancies. Be comforted, I will still try to overcome his rancour. I have already gained much; he is no longer so bad as formerly. I know him: in a few days I shall succeed in making him change his mind, and then I will come and call you."

"Be as kind as that, Matthew; I shall thank you as long as I live."

"Come, Cecilia, I must leave you; take courage."

"And if it should happen between this and then, that he became really ill, Matthew?"

"Oh! then I will come and seek you, whether he will or no."

"Thank you, thank you, dear!" said the young girl, whilst Matthew was already walking away from her.

"It is strange," said the latter, resuming his way. "I really believe that she would be capable of scorning the property if it were offered to her. Is she innocent enough for that? There are other ways of being happy! Love, no doubt? I am curious to know how long this happiness will last. The bird that has no seed in his trough has soon done singing! Ah! she wants to see her Uncle John. We shall take good care that she does not succeed in that."

Whilst reflecting to himself on this subject, and on many others, he took a side path, and followed it, until he perceived a cottage with a coppice at the back.

"Observe?" said he, to himself; "that is the dwelling of the mason's widow. Don't let's disclose our design too soon. She must be at home: for I see her child down there, grovelling in the dust."

He drew near to the humble clay cottage with cautious steps. The child only perceived him at the moment when, having come quite close to her, he said,—

"Good morning, dear Mariette; where is your mother?"

As if the little girl had heard the voice of an evil spirit, she started to her feet all trembling, cast at Matthew a terrified look, and fled, screaming and crying, through the coppice in the direction of the fields.

"It seems that I am no better loved here than is necessary," growled Matthew; "if the mother is not more amiable than the child, I shall not do great things."

With these words, he entered the cottage, looked at everything there in a mocking way, saying to himself,—

"The widow is not rich; everything I see here is

not worth ten *stuivers*. I begin to think I shall succeed; money must be powerful in such a hole. Let's sit down and wait a little, perhaps the child has gone to find her mother."

In fact he was not mistaken; the little girl had escaped to a field where her mother was at work, and quite trembling with fear, she had announced to her Matthew's arrival.

At this news the widow seemed at first overwhelmed with astonishment. What could the odious knave want with her? She remained some time, her eye fixed on the ground, seeking an answer to this question. Gradually, however, a smile was delineated on her face, a smile in which a malignant expression was joined to a certain feeling of joy.

She left her child in the fields near some other women, and set out reflectively in the direction of her cottage.

"Matthew come to visit me!" she thought; "what can it mean? Something must have happened, or at least some serious matter is in train. I know that he is afraid of me; he trembles when he sees me; so he does not come from friendship. There is a snake in the grass. Look out, Catherine! He is cunning, and it is more than probable that he intends to deceive you. I should like to know what he has his disposal."

She reached the cottage and entered, saying to Matthew,—

"Well, is it really you that I see? I should not have thought that you would ever sit down under my poor roof; but since you are here, what is your pleasure?"

"Sit down, Catherine," answered Matthew, embarrassed at the outset by the widow's resolute manner; "I have to speak to you about something of importance."

The widow took a chair and answered,—

"I have not much time, so be quick; I am listening."

"You see, Catherine, I know that you are poor; I am sorry for you, and if I could improve your lot it would give me real pleasure."

"Yes, indeed!" said the widow, with a mocking smile; "it was from pity, perhaps, that during the winter you ill-treated my poor Mariette, and cast me from the door like a dog?"

"Forget that, Catherine; times change, and men too. I regret my hard-heartedness to you; I would make amends for it if it were possible. Now I can come to your assistance, and bring you relief, if you do not reject my help."

The widow looked at him with distrust, and without

saying a word, although he was evidently waiting for an answer.

"If I gave you money," continued he, "enough money to shield you and your children from all need, would you be grateful to me, Catherine?"

"Do you wish to offer me charity?" asked the widow.

"No, it is more than that. You know, Catherine, that I am sole heir to Uncle John. You, on your husband's side, have a right to a small part of this inheritance. You believe so, at least. It is on that account—for you are well aware that you would never obtain anything—it is on that account that you always bear me so much malice. Well, judge what affection I bear you. I am come to offer you your share of the inheritance."

The widow appeared stupefied.

"Yes," resumed Matthew, "whether the estate comes to me, or goes to another, you would never have anything, for your right is doubtful, and you could only establish it at great expense. You alone, amongst the would-be heirs, are in real poverty, that is why I come to you, moved by a sentiment of honesty, to give you the part which in your opinion recurs to you, and to give it you without demanding your title, without raising a contest. What do you say?"

"Oh, you are very kind," said the widow; "but are you serious, are you sincere in what you say?"

"What need have I to come and make you this offer? Well, Catherine, do you accept?"

"With gratitude, with deep gratitude, Matthew; but I should like to know if you do not exact some conditions from me; to give simply is not your character, or you must, indeed, be terribly changed."

"No, I give you the whole without conditions," answered Matthew.

"Then I accept joyfully. Your generosity astonishes me so much, that I still think you are wishing to laugh at me."

"Why so?"

"When shall I have the money, Matthew?"

"As soon as I myself am in possession of the estate."

"And what guarantee have I that you will keep your promises?"

"My word as an honest man."

"Possibly that word may be worth something since you say you are so profoundly changed. So I take it for what it is, and I thank you. Now I must return to my work."

She rose, and was going to set out, with a smile

which plainly showed that she did not believe a word of all that Matthew had said to her.

"Wait a minute," said he; "I will prove to you that I am telling the truth. You know, or you don't know, Catherine, that Uncle John is ill. He has the gout, and no longer leaves his room. This illness gives me a great deal of work; there are errands to run, there is one thing or another to cook, and I don't very well understand that. Uncle John has begged me to seek a woman who can remain during the day at the convent to help me. She will have good wages, and will be well taken care of in every way."

Since Matthew had entered upon this last question, the widow had fixed her eyes on him with more attention and curiosity; she appeared to be waiting for every word as it came from his mouth, but endeavoured to conceal her emotion as much as possible.

"And I have come to you, Catherine, to ask if you would be willing to come to the convent? Every evening you will return home, and in the morning you will come back to us. For the small amount of trouble this will give you, you will receive as much as if you were working in the fields. And further you will have food. Is it a bad offer?"

"Not the least in the world; indeed, what could

be better? The inheritance is an egg which is not yet laid, Matthew; by some misfortune it might even escape you yourself; but daily wages are money certain."

"Then you accept?"

"Undoubtedly, undoubtedly, Matthew; who would refuse such an offer?"

"But your children, Catherine? I had not remembered them."

"My children? Two are at my sister's, three leagues from here at least; Mariette keeps the cows at the farmer's, she will be taken good care of during the day. I shall see her every evening."

"That is well," said Matthew, gladly. "So the agreement is made. Come, Catherine, give me your hand to prove that we understand one another. There, the business is settled. When must I expect you? The soonest possible will be the best. This afternoon?"

"Perhaps even sooner," answered the widow. "I have nothing else to do than to say a word to Farmer Claes and his wife about Mariette and the work."

Matthew rose and made as if he was going away, but he stopped and resumed with apparent indifference,—

"Catherine, you said just now that the inheritance

might escape myself. If that were to happen, I could not give you your share."

"I understand that," said the widow; "but fear nothing, it won't escape you."

"So much the better for you and me, Catherine; but prudence is never out of place. Cecilia, indeed, has given up her share to me with her full consent. This morning again I wished to give her some hope; she answered me with a positive refusal. But there are others, who have no right to the estate, and who, in order to be able to get into the house, are spreading the report that Uncle John is dangerously ill. You must tell the truth to everybody, and declare to each that Uncle John has the gout; you will do that, won't you?"

"I will do everything that you wish," answered the widow.

"You see, Catherine, if we can, as is necessary, quiet the world on the subject, people will no longer trouble themselves with our affairs."

"Leave me alone, Matthew; you know that I don't put my tongue in my pocket."

"One word more, Catherine, I must tell you, otherwise you would be astonished: Uncle John will be waited on by me only; you will not see him ess he comes down stairs."

"It was so before he was ill; that does not surprise me."

"You will allow no one to enter the house during my absence, is it not so? You will shut the door inside, and will not open it, whether they knock or no?"

"I will do what you wish. I can say no more."

"In effect, you see that if you do not set to work with devotion and intelligence, I should be obliged to seek another charwoman, and all would be at an end between us."

"Return home, tranquil and easy," said the widow, rising; "if you are not satisfied with me you never will be with any one."

"Till we meet again, then, and come at twelve, or sooner, if you can. Here is God's penny; you see I am not stingy to you."

He put a two-franc piece into the widow's hand, left the cottage, and soon disappeared behind the coppice.

The widow looked after him a moment, and then said to herself with an ironical smile,—

"Oh, oh, the false demon! He thinks that I have sold my soul to him—sold it for empty promises. What can be going on at the convent that he wants an accomplice? So he needs me to help him to deceive

Cecilia, that angel of goodness, and to deprive her of what belongs to her, the hypocritical Judas. What does he think I am, then, the rascal! God in his justice has reserved that for him. It is with me, indeed, that he must have business."

She remained for an instant buried in thought; soon the mocking smile disappeared from her face, to give place to a softer expression, and her eye beaming with joy, she exclaimed,—

"To restore to Cecilia her fortune and her uncle's love! To recompense her and Bartholomew, my kind benefactors, for their compassion! To punish the cheat, to fight against and overcome the wicked! Oh, it would be grand! Let me pray to God to give the poor widow sufficient skill to triumph over villainy!"

She left the cottage and followed a foot-path. Then only did she remember the money that Matthew had put into her hand. She looked at it a moment with disgust, threw it from her, far away beyond the trees, and wiped her hand with her apron, as if the silver had left a stain there.

VIII.

THE beggar had already spent three days at the old convent. She perceived nothing which could cause her to conjecture anything worse than she had thought of; on the contrary, she was beginning to believe that she had been, in some measure, deceived with respect to Matthew. He showed so much solicitude for the old man, and spoke with so much pity of his benefactor, that Catherine began to doubt whether some good instincts had not survived in his heart. She no longer thought that the uncle was seriously ill, for Matthew gave her, twice a day, meat to roast and potatoes to cook for the old man; and if he was able to take this substantial nourishment, he must certainly be still strong, and in a pretty good state of health.

Catherine was mistaken. If she had followed the knave into the dark corridors, when he appeared to be taking Uncle John his dinner, she would have seen him turn, and put in his own room the strengthening nourishment. Uncle John only received loath-

some food, which turned his stomach, and in preference he still gnawed the old crust of brown bread, little, indeed, as it could nourish him.

In fact, in proportion as he felt more of the torture of hunger, the old man began to ask for other food with growing impatience, and even with a certain irritation; but Matthew knew so well how to wheedle him, or listened so little to his entreaties, that each time the poor man, weary and discouraged, gave up his request.

At the end of the third day, at the time that Catherine was going to leave the convent and return home to bed, Matthew begged her to come back the same evening, under the pretext that Uncle John wished to take a bath, and that, therefore, it would be necessary to heat a large quantity of water.

Catherine put Mariette to bed, and returned to the convent. Matthew told her that Uncle John no longer wished for a bath, but that she must, nevertheless, remain, to sit up, because the invalid had fever, and that it was impossible to tell whether it might not be necessary to send for the doctor without delay; and even, perhaps, whether it might not be a good precaution to go and fetch the curé. Uncle John was not worse than before, but a failing old man could not bear much. That is why it was

prudent to have some one at hand in case help should be needed; it might be, that, contrary to all expectation, the affair would become serious!

The widow did not allow herself to be quite deceived by this language; she suspected that Uncle John's illness was more serious than she was told, and intended, if this continued, to break with Matthew the next morning, and set the curé and burgomaster upon him, who, in the name of the law and of religion, would succeed in fathoming the guilty mystery.

She was seated alone, near the fire-place, and was reflecting on the course she should adopt, to make the authorities understand the illegal measures which had been pursued, in order to deprive Cecilia of her hereditary share; perhaps the curé would not refuse to make an effort to bring Uncle John to more just sentiments; and by this means she would, perhaps, succeed, to the advantage of her benefactors, in attaining an end which might escape her if she remained at the convent, since, up to the present time, she had not seen the old uncle.

In the midst of these reflections, the fear took possession of her that to-morrow might, perhaps, be too late; who could tell what was passing above, between Matthew and the old man? This doubt,

this secret dread, made her uneasy. From time to time she rose, and went on tip-toe, walking carefully into the corridor leading to Uncle John's bedroom. She remained a moment at the foot of the stairs, listening, but as she heard nothing, all being quiet above, she returned, reseated herself under the chimney-piece, and resumed the thread of her meditations.

Midnight is striking by the village clock; the melancholy sounds of the bell re-echo plaintively, and die away, one by one, into space, until everything relapses into a dull silence.

In Uncle John's room a little tin lamp is burning, whose reddish and smoky flame sheds a cheerless light. The extremities of the chamber remain in shadow; the scene is strange and dismal; the dark walls are not distinguishable; and one might fancy oneself in an immense and boundless space, like the infinite.

A portion only of the bed, and of the table near it, fall under the red reflections of the lamp. The old man is lying on his side, his face turned towards the table. He appears asleep; still, from time to time, his eyes open mechanically, to close again in the same way, silent and insensible.

His face is frightful; nothing remains on his an-

gular skull but a thin and transparent skin, which seems tight over the bones; his eyes are glassy and lifeless, his lips colourless. But the red light of the flame quivers over his features, as it might be a funeral lamp, which throws its last rays on the livid cheeks of a corpse.

Near the table Matthew is seated on a chair. He wishes to watch over the invalid, but sleep has overpowered him, and he is sleeping with his head leaning on the back of the chair.

His odious features are also lighted up; now, when repose must relax all the energy of his countenance, his froward mind still leaves its impress, and an evil grin contracts his large mouth. Sometimes his lips move; his forehead is furrowed by numerous wrinkles; nervous movements, expressive of inward passion, pass over his face. It is evident that he is dreaming.

The old man has again opened his eyes; he sees the convulsive agitation of Matthew's features. His eyes are fixed in terror on this appalling spectacle. Consciousness and reflection are awaking in him; his glance goes round the room; he looks at the lamp, whose feeble and gloomy light wavers in the darkness like a will-o'-the-wisp, and with unspeakable anguish he looks again at Matthew's face. The

latter, whilst dreaming, grinds his teeth; his lips are turned up as if he were ready to bite; the expression of his countenance is so cruel and so ferocious, that the sick man, quite trembling, closes his eyes; but a new incident forces him to re-open them.

Some sounds escape from Matthew's mouth; he seems to be speaking. His physiognomy changes, the angry expression disappears, he smiles and appears quite happy. He speaks with his eyes closed, it is not all intelligible, sometimes his voice is weak, and his lips move without articulating a sound; he says,—

"A cellar—a hundred thousand florins—the old miser. I will give you much, much. To-morrow, to-morrow he will be dead. Take away that meat, or else he will recover—water, bread. He will not die—hunger will help him to it. I have a will—patience, he is going, he is going, he has the death-rattle, he is dying. Ah! ah! all his money to me."

The old man uttered a terrible cry.

Matthew awoke with a start, stood up, trembling, rubbed his eyes, and looked stupidly at Uncle John, who was calling for help with all his strength, and was filling the room with cries of anguish and terror.

As soon as Matthew had satisfied himself that there was no fear of any attack from the outside, he under-

stood the cause of the old man's alarm, and presumed on sounding his own emotion, that he had, perhaps, talked in his dream.

He allowed the sick man to scream for some moments, until he ceased from exhaustion; whilst waiting, with his arms crossed on his chest, he contemplated him with a cruel smile on his lips.

"Well, Uncle John," said he, "how much longer will that go on? Make a noise, call, scream, it is useless; no one can hear you."

But the old man, more terrified still by the expression of Matthew's face, began to scream afresh for help, in a despairing voice. One would have said that the fear of death had doubled his strength, his movements were still energetic, and his piercing voice must have carried some distance.

"Silence!" exclaimed Matthew, putting his fist in Uncle John's face, and threatening to strike him. "Silence, or I will smother your voice."

Uncle John was silent. Matthew withdrew his fist.

"Let me hear you again," said he, in a threatening tone.

The old man was silent for a moment, as if to recover breath, for his chest was palpitating violently, his angry gaze continued fixed on Matthew.

The latter asked, in a mocking voice,—

"Shall I know at last what wasp has stung you? Perhaps I was dreaming? Are you mad to lead me such a life? You would do better to try and sleep, it would do you more good than these foolish freaks."

These words still further inflamed the old man's wrath.

"Serpent!" he exclaimed, "so you are letting me die of hunger, like a dog? I am living too long. Bread and water will kill me slowly, by hunger. You must have my money, and for that I am condemned to die, assassin!"

Matthew looked uneasily at the old man, and seemed to be trembling under the certainty that his knavery was completely discovered.

"But," continued Uncle John, "my money shall escape you. You imagined that I should die to-night? No, no, God will still give me strength to punish you, wretch. To-morrow, to-morrow, I tear up my will, you shall have nothing, nothing but my curse. To-morrow I will have Cecilia summoned, the notary, witnesses, and gendarmes to take you to prison. I will accuse, I will have you punished as you deserve. Ah, you thought that I was dead? You will see."

"Oh, oh," said Matthew, with bitter scorn; "nobody will hear you."

"To-morrow, in the day-time," answered Uncle John, "I will call, and I will scream so long and so determinately, that some one will hear me at last."

Matthew, without speaking, fixed a steady gaze on the old man's eyes; those last words seemed to have made a deep impression on him. First, his countenance become serious, betokened grave meditation. Gradually his lips turned up, and resumed their vile smile, and he drew near the bed. He put aside the table, stationed himself again before the old man, with his arms crossed, and addressed him in a mocking tone,—

"Your folly makes me laugh. Did you, then, believe that I have lived here ten years like a slave—that during ten years I have fawned upon you like a dog, out of affection for you. Did you believe that during ten years I have accepted food fit to throw to pigs, from taste? Did you imagine that I have spent the ten best years of my life in this frightful solitude, because I do not love life? Did you believe that I have played the hypocrite, that I have deceived, calumniated, and anything else you will, without an aim, and without a hope of recompense? Did you

esteem me, then, more innocent and more stupid than a child? No, no, if I have sacrificed to you my will, my tastes, my life, my soul, you shall pay for it all, you shall pay for it by its weight in gold!"

"You shall have nothing," growled the old man, bitterly, "nothing."

"Nothing," replied Matthew; "you find that easy to say, but you have lost your head. You do not, then, fear what I can do? You forget that you are at my mercy, neither more nor less than if you were in the midst of a desert, and no one could see how I claim my payment? You call me wretch, you call me assassin? You do not believe your own words, since you provoke the lion which is able to devour you, which will devour you if you do not satisfy his hunger. I am hungry for your gold, Uncle John. Satisfy me, satisfy me, or——"

Saying these words, he fixed his eyes, so fiery, so fierce on the old man, that the latter, uttering fresh cries, fell back on his bed.

"Satisfy me, satisfy me!" exclaimed Matthew, quite beside himself, and grinding his teeth as if he were ready to commit a murder.

"Oh, my God, help!" screamed the sick man, holding out his trembling hands. "Matthew, Matthew, what do you want?"

"I want your keys," yelled Matthew; "your keys, I tell you."

The old man did not answer, but Matthew's demand seemed to inspire him with more terror than his threats. He made a convulsive movement under the bed-clothes, and remained still, his body drawn together as if to resist an aggression.

"Ah! ah!" Matthew exclaimed, "I know well enough you would rather give me your soul than your keys, but I will have them; I must: hold them in both hands, I shall know well enough how to tear them from you. Give, give!"

He threw himself on the sick man, and thrust his hand under the bed-clothes, seeking for the keys. He dragged, shook, struggled, bellowed like a mad bull, but the old man's hands grasped the keys with so much power, that to take them from him it would have been necessary to tear off his arms.

Tired, exhausted, restrained, perhaps, by a terrible thought, Matthew loosed the keys, and the struggle ceased. He replaced himself, standing before the bed, and, quite breathless, looked at the old man, who had hidden the keys under the bed-clothes.

A transformation which eludes all description took place in Matthew's countenance; his face, which habitually expressed only hatred and wickedness,

suddenly assumed an expression so wild and savage, so infernal, that it became unrecognizable from rage and ferocity. His cheeks were contracted, he ground his teeth, a frightful pallor discoloured his face, his hair stood on end, like the bristles of a hyena. He screamed out in a hoarse and eager voice,—

"Oh, you will not pay me? You still live? Well, death shall pay me!"

He sprang on the bed like a wild beast, squatted down on the sick man, rested both elbows on his chest, and leant upon him, so as to crush him.

A dismal death rattle was heard, the old man's limbs stiffened, quivering, and he fell back lifeless.

Matthew seized the keys, and with one single shake broke the string by which they were attached to Uncle John's neck. He withdrew slowly from the bed.

He stood still, with one hand leaning on the table, trembling from terror or from fatigue to such an extent that the trembling was communicated to the floor. His eye was fixed on the motionless body of his victim, a cold sweat stood in beads on his forehead and cheeks.

Perhaps he repented; perhaps the consequences of his dreadful crime made him shudder. Whatever it was, he remained a long time, as if thunder-

struck, until a hoarse and frightful noise burst forth from his contracted throat.

He took the lamp mechanically, and with an unsteady hand approached the door, and opened it.

A cry of anguish escaped him. The beggar-woman was before him! Placed behind the door, perhaps she had heard, perhaps she had seen through the key-hole what had just taken place.

Matthew, his eyes flashing, looked at the woman, who appeared not to know the cause of his emotion; he raised the bunch of keys as if he wished to strike her on the head.

"What are you doing here?" he yelled.

"I thought you called me," answered the beggar-woman, drawing back, and with the evident intention of escaping. "Perhaps it was Uncle John who called? Come, come, don't be so angry, I am going back again as I came."

Matthew let the hand which held the keys fall back again to his side, and said to the poor woman, in a trembling voice,—

"Uncle John has been seized with apoplexy. I believe he is dead. Go to him—no, go down. Shut all the doors properly, and then see if he is dead. Give him some vinegar."

The agitated villain no longer knew what he was

saying; his nervous system was so violently shaken by the atrocious crime to which his cruelty had prompted him.

With an unsteady step he reached a heavy door, found the key, after some fumbling, and entered a dark passage, which extended from one end of the building to the other. The little lamp scarcely lighted the walls, and threw around him a pale light, powerless to dissipate the darkness.

He advanced with an uncertain step, feeling his way in this place, which was strange to him: perhaps he was afraid; perhaps his conscience was already causing the just punishment reserved by God for his crime to appear before his perturbed gaze. What would not his terror have been had he seen the human shadow which was following him at a distance in the obscurity.

Suddenly he apparently heard a noise behind him, for he turned his head and stopped. But he soon pursued his way until a door, as peculiar as the first, hindered him from going further. This was a small door, low and round, whose surface was so covered with plates of iron and thick nails that the wood could scarcely be distinguished. A large lock, red with rust, was attached to the wall, and a thick bar of iron placed across the door closed this entrance to the miser's treasure.

His heart beating, Matthew, with a painful effort, turned the key in the lock, and removed all obstacles. He descended the staircase, and found himself in a spacious cellar.

Once in the very place where Uncle John's treasures were hidden, the assassin forgot his crime; his conscience was silent, fear entirely left him. He experienced no other emotion than the ardent desire to see the gold—touch the gold—have the gold. On his face was depicted the smile of ecstasy, in his eyes shone the fire of covetousness.

Lamp in hand, he went searchingly round the cellar. He discovered nothing—nothing, but four bare walls, and, near the staircase, a heavy stone, which had evidently served as a seat. He began to tremble; anxiety and the fear of deception contracted his features. "It is impossible! Ah! what do I see? is it not a key-hole?"

He burst out laughing; and, mad with joy, rushed towards the spot he had observed; then seeking the key, and finally opening a hiding-place, contrived in the thickness of the wall, he exclaimed,—

"Ah! ah! there is the treasure! Three sacks! four—five sacks of gold! of gold!"

Transported with joy, with a trembling hand he took one of the canvas sacks, and began care-

fully to untie the string which closed it; but a sudden fear made him start abruptly; the sack escaped from his hand. He turned towards the stairs, and listened, trembling. It seemed to him that he had heard a noise at the cellar-door, a noise like the grinding of a bolt.

He remained for some moments motionless and shuddering—not the least sound was to be heard. Gradually his confidence returned, he picked up the fallen sack, saying,—

"Oh! it is nothing; it is the lock which has shut itself! Quick, let's open the sack!"

A scornful expression drew in his lips at the moment, when, having plunged his hand into the sack, he drew out a handful of pieces of money.

"Copper!" he murmured; "copper!"

And he dropped the sack to take another.

"Copper! still copper," he exclaimed, with increasing emotion.

And he repeated the sad exclamation, "Copper!" each time he opened a fresh sack.

In proportion as his search advanced, his cheeks grew paler: a cold perspiration beaded his forehead, his chest oppressed, he breathed with difficulty.

At length he seized the last sack, and when, staggering on his legs, he had untied it, the cry of anguish,

"Copper! copper!" escaped once more from his contracted mouth.

Whilst with his left hand he convulsively dashed away the fatal sack, which had just so cruelly destroyed his last hope of finding the gold, he plunged his right into the hiding-place, and rummaged restlessly to assure himself that no other object was hidden there: it was empty, his hand encountered nothing. Not yet satisfied, he introduced the lamp, and put his head into the cavity: he saw nothing but smooth stones.

A mournful cry died in his throat; with a tottering step he reached the stone, sank down there enfeebled, and rested the lamp on the ground.

He remained seated an instant, his hand to his forehead, his gaze glassy, and lost in the darkness. Then, he said, in a tone which indicated at once depression and anger,—

"Some pounds of copper! So this is the price of ten years of servitude and misery! the price of a murder—the price of my soul! Oh! Uncle John —traitor, hypocrite, thief, he has deceived me, he has robbed me. This, then, is the happiness so long expected! the wealth, the luxury, the grandeur. A heap of copper. Malediction! I have killed him—well, did he not deserve it? Ah! I

ought to have killed him slowly, with long tortures, the traitor!"

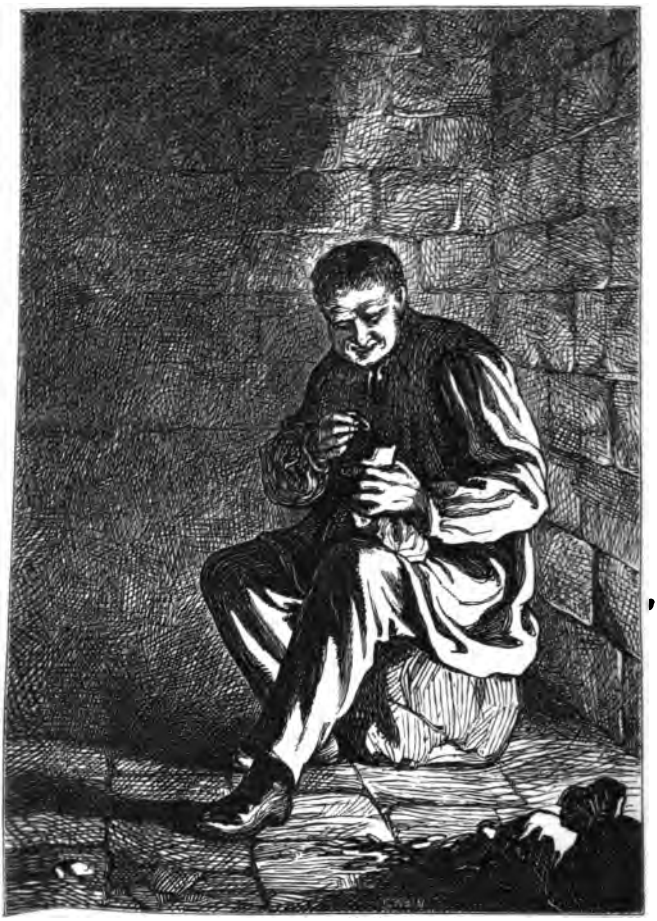
He became silent, and remained with his eyes fixed on the pavement. Soon tears burst forth from his eyes; the cowardly wretch began to weep and sob like a child. However, this sadness did not master him long. He uttered a frightful curse, sprang up standing, seized the sack, which was lying at his feet, shrieked out inarticulate cries, and in his fury threw the heavy sack to the end of the cellar. A hollow clanking answered like the clashing of metal.

"Oh!" exclaimed Matthew, with joyful surprise, "what is that?"

And running with the lamp, he fell on his knees in a corner of the cellar, and in his mad delight he began to strike the resounding earth with his fists, and to make affirmative signs with his head.

He had soon raised a little trap-door, and he looked downwards with delight into the recess whose lid he had just raised: there, also, were laid canvas sacks filled with money.

"The stupid cheat!" Matthew murmured, drawing out a sack, "he lays a snare, he puts a bait, he hides a little copper in a place which strikes the eye first. But it does not succeed; here is the hoard!"



"Oh! oh!" he murmured, "how beautiful it is! how it shines! . . . . Fulloa! that is the price of my soul!"

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"Gold! it is gold!" exclaimed he, suddenly, with so strange a voice, that one would have thought one heard a child's cries of joy. "Gold! and this? what will this be? Gold! still gold! And the third? gold! always gold!"

When he had pulled out and opened a certain number of sacks, and nothing more remained in the hole, he crept back a little, and forgetting the whole world, he seated himself, and began to pour out the contents of all the sacks on to his knees.

For an instant, he contemplated this heap of gold with a steadfast gaze; to judge by the expression of his face, it might be said that he saw heaven and all its bliss opened before him. It was such an ecstasy of enjoyment that it resembled madness.

"Oh! oh!" he murmured, "how beautiful it is! how it shines! It is alive with brilliancy and splendour. And how much is there? Hulloa, that is the price of my soul! It is well paid for, it is not worth so much. Ah! ah! to live to possess, to enjoy every pleasure, to be a gentleman, to have servants, to eat, to drink, to go in a carriage, to be powerful, to be flattered by all, to break down everything which resists, or does not bow to the dust before my pride! It is all there—there, in that inanimate money, in

that glittering metal! Oh! let me touch it, let me feel it, let me possess it!"

And quite beside himself, he began to bathe his hands in the gold, uttering a thousand exclamations of happiness, and counting and counting again the money without any apparent aim.

He enjoyed this for a long time in perfect oblivion of everything, when the light of the lamp grew pale. His countenance suddenly became full of care, he looked anxiously round the cellar; he rose and said, passing his hand over his forehead,—

"What is it? what did I come here to do? Am I mad? ah! quick! I must hide this gold elsewhere, so that nobody can find it but me. Quick, the light is failing, there is no more oil."

Saying this, he filled the two largest sacks with gold, took one under each arm, and, thus laden, he climbed the staircase. Arrived at the door, he rested his burden on a step, and put the key into the lock. But it was useless to turn it, and turn it back: whatever effort he made, the door did not move; it seemed imbedded in the wall, so immovable did it remain, although the bolt played under the pressure of the key.

Matthew began to tremble, an icy shudder ran through all his limbs; however, he could not, he

dared not, give credence to his fears, to his uneasiness, and again tried with earnest efforts to open the door. He worked the key in every way, he threw himself against the door, and tried to unhinge it. This rough work made the perspiration stream over his forehead. Nothing was successful, nothing gave even some hope.

Finally, overcome with weariness, he sank down as if crushed, and said, in despair, letting his head fall on his chest,—

"It is frightful. Closed from outside! No, no, it is impossible. I am mistaken! Who could have done it? Catherine? and her share of the inheritance? Oh, heaven, the light is growing dim—the lamp—the lamp is out! Let's be quick—another effort!"

He put the key into the lock again, and worked it so long and so restlessly that his hands quite ached, and were covered with bruises; his back, his shoulders, his knees were bleeding with his superhuman efforts. Hoarse and savage cries accompanied this despairing labour. Nothing succeeded, the door continued immovable.

Convinced of the inutility of his efforts, Matthew descended the staircase, and began to walk up and down the dark cellar like a madman. Complete dark-

ness surrounded him, his eye descried no light, it might have been called a closed tomb.

The wretched man tore his hair, and struck his forehead violently; he went with hurried steps from one corner of the cellar to the other, as if he was seeking an outlet through which to fly; he lamented, he wept, he blasphemed, got into a passion, uttered cries and pronounced unintelligible words; he ascended the staircase, called Catherine's name through the lock, then returned to walk like a wild beast round his prison, until he struck himself against the stone, and sank down there at last, exhausted with weariness.

"This, then, is the end of my laborious and incessant work," he murmured, in a melancholy voice. "In order to possess gold I have made myself a demon!—I have killed a man! And now—now—here I am, shut up in a dark dungeon; no one can hear me. Perhaps, perhaps I shall die here—die of hunger. Horror! And if God had determined it thus? In this way I wished to put an end to Uncle John, by hunger. Die, die in the midst of gold! Have the death-rattle expire on heaps of gold! Have the means in my hand of finding on earth happiness, power, enjoyments of every kind, and die like a dog! Fall into hell to burn eternally, to be cursed and in-

sulted as a wretch, too stupid to succeed in evil. Malediction!"

This last word resounded dismally under the vault. No other sound came to break the silence.

Later, sobs and sighs might have been heard in the darkness.

Matthew had been seated for a long time on the stone; more than once he had risen, to return soon to his place, when suddenly he saw a ray of light on the wall, which appeared to penetrate into the cellar through the key-hole.

He sprang up in a transport of joy, leaped up the staircase, and applying his mouth to the lock, he said, all trembling with hope and happiness,—

"Catherine, dear Catherine, is it you?"

"It is I," answered some one.

"Oh, Catherine, just look what there is outside the door, it will not open."

"I believe it, indeed; I barricaded it with the iron bar," replied the voice.

"What? Why? Catherine, dear Catherine, do not joke. For the love of heaven, open it!"

"Indeed, you are hoping that?" said the voice. "I have caught a venomous beast in a snare, and should I open the trap to get myself and others bitten? Be contrite, Matthew, it is all over with you. God

and poor Catherine have at last found their opportunity!"

Matthew fathomed the beggar's design, and shuddered with terror. He exclaimed, in a trembling voice,—

"Catherine, I have here a sack filled with gold. It is for you."

"I do not want stolen money."

"Two sacks full of gold, Catherine! Oh, open to me, open to me."

He obtained no answer, and resumed,—

"Catherine, there are four sacks for you. Listen, listen, it is all gold."

And he scattered on the steps a handful of pieces in the hope that the sound of them would tempt the poor woman.

A burst of laughing greeted this last effort.

"Catherine," he resumed, in a beseeching voice, "I will marry you, we will have it all between us two. There is so much, oh, so much!"

"Thief, assassin, coward!" replied Catherine, roughly.

"Oh, Catherine," said Matthew, in a plaintive voice, "here I am on my knees in the darkness. I am holding towards you my trembling hands, and I implore your help; have pity on me. Be merciful. Open

the door, I will love you, I will be grateful to you my whole life."

"I do pity you," answered Catherine.

"Ah!" exclaimed Matthew, with hope, "I knew quite well that you would deliver me."

"I do pity you," the poor woman replied, ironically. "I have pity on you as you had pity on Cecilia. I am compassionate to you, as you were to Uncle John, your benefactor. But I did not come for that, Matthew, I want to show you something. Look through the keyhole at what I hold in my hand; look what I am doing."

Matthew applied his eye to the hole, and as there was light outside he could see well enough what the beggar was doing.

She unfolded a paper, and said,—

"Do you see it? You have assassinated the sick old man, because you had a will which was to make you the proprietor of all his fortune. He did not die quickly enough. Do you still believe that this estate cannot be taken from you? This will was hidden in the deepest drawer in the closet in your room. Catherine is poor, but she knows how to read. Listen."

She read in a clear voice, emphasising each word,—

"I hereby declare that I appoint Charles Dominic Matthew as my sole heir. And this is the expression of my last wish."

"My will, my will!" screamed Matthew, in despair.

"And now do you see what I do?" replied the beggar.

"Good heaven!" exclaimed Matthew, "she is tearing it. My hope, my life! Catherine, you are murdering me."

He perceived by the movement of the light that the woman was going away. He made one last effort, and cried, in a heart-rending tone,—

"Catherine, Catherine! oh, don't go away. Open the door, open the door! You wish, then, to make me die of hunger in this horrible dungeon!"

"It would be a just punishment from God," answered the beggar, "if you died as you wished to make Uncle John die, but such a death is too sweet for you. They will soon come to deliver you. I have been to the burgomaster, he has sent the rural guard to seek those who will open the cellar door for you, and let you go out, but you will go out with your hands tied behind your back. Prison awaits you. On the scaffold you will expiate your crime; on the scaffold you will leave your head, and you will appear

as a murderer before God, who knows your hellish villany."

Matthew, motionless behind the door, and as it were petrified, saw through the lock, with a shudder, that Catherine was going away with the light. When the last reflection of the light vanished from his eyes, a horrible cry burst from him, he fell like a corpse, and his body rolled over down the stairs to the cellar floor.

IX.

THE first rays of morning were throwing a bluish tint into the room where Matthew had committed on the sick old man his attempted murder. His motionless body was lying stretched on the bed. To see his pale and distorted features, one could not have doubted but that death had some time already extinguished the last spark of life in the bosom of the corpse. This conjecture, however, would not have been altogether well founded, for the old man's bosom still heaved convulsively, as if he was bearing the last conflict of agony, and as if his soul was struggling to free itself from material bonds.

Over the old man's face a young girl bent, who was watching for each sign of life with eager attention, and trembled or wept from grief or hope according as the sick man's breathing became more laboured or more tranquil. It was Cecilia, who, for the last hour, had been silently weeping, and who, broken down by grief, was endeavouring by her kisses to bring her or uncle back to life.

Janet was standing at the head of the bed, ready to second Cecilia in the cares that she was lavishing on the dying man.

Farther away, at the end of the room, Bartholomew and his mother, on their knees, were offering in a low voice, with clasped hands, an earnest prayer to God.

The curé had already been with the sick man, and had prayed beside him; the doctor, also summoned, declared that the old man was exhausted from hunger. On this account he had ordered them to give him, by spoonfuls, some meat broth, and a draught which he had prescribed. The bowl and the phial, which were near the bed, contained these two remedies.

Cecilia had already carefully introduced several spoonfuls into her uncle's mouth. She thought she could observe that it was doing him good, and by degrees passed down his throat with greater facility, as if the patient himself eagerly swallowed the salutary beverage.

At the moment when, having put into the old man's mouth a fresh spoonful, she was going to withdraw, it seemed to her that his lips moved. This sight made her tremble. She gave him a second spoonful; he swallowed it with an evident movement of the throat. Quivering with hope, and quite beside

herself, she continued to give him broth, fixing on his face a gaze full of anxiety.

Suddenly a convulsive shudder seemed to run through the sick man's limbs. He stiffened himself and remained motionless; his very breathing appeared stopped.

A cry so sorrowful and so heart-rending broke from Cecilia, that Bartholomew and his mother started terrified, and hurriedly approached the bed.

Cecilia, her head bent down over her uncle's bosom, sobbed aloud, and bathed the old man's neck with scalding tears. She mingled heart-breaking expressions of grief with soft words of tenderness and love, and from time to time she kissed the icy lips of him whose death she was deploring.

But soon a second cry escaped her, a cry of joy and surprise. Uncle John moved his lips, he opened and shut his mouth, as if his exhausted body were mechanically asking for food.

The girl sprang forward, and with feverish agitation offered him two or three spoonfuls of broth; in her joy she would probably have made him take the whole bowl full, if the fear of transgressing the doctor's order had not restrained her.

She then laid down the spoon, bent over his face, and watched for the effect which the fresh

nourishment that he had taken would produce on him.

Suddenly the patient opened his eyes, and stared at the sweet face which was smiling on him, as if that face were unknown to him.

"Uncle John—father—you live! I thank Thee, oh my God!" exclaimed Cecilia, in a thrilling voice.

The old man closed his eyes again, and for an instant remained quite motionless. Then his gaze turned afresh to the girl, and he looked at her for a long time, as if he were asking of his memory who she could be. His arm moved almost imperceptibly, he raised it slowly, and passed it round his niece's neck, drew her to him and kissed her, saying, in a barely audible voice,—

"Cecilia!"

That word, that name, that kiss, seemed to make Cecilia wild. She disengaged herself from her uncle's embrace, and said, in a voice vibrating with emotion, to the others who were standing near the bed,—

"Pray, oh pray!"

And she herself fell on her knees, and was for some moments lost in the most ardent prayer that gratitude could inspire; then she rose and returned to the head of the bed.

The old man had turned on his side, and was

looking round the room with a questioning and astonished gaze. He pointed to the three still kneeling on the floor.

"Who is there?" he asked, in a feeble voice.

"Good heavens, good heavens! he lives, he speaks, he will recover! My poor uncle, my kind father!" exclaimed Cecilia, seizing both the sick man's hands, and pressing them affectionately.

The old man smiled sweetly, but his eye turned again in a questioning manner to the people kneeling.

"It is Bartholomew—Bartholomew who is praying for you," said Cecilia; "and his mother, and his sister Janet besides, who are praying to God to vouchsafe your recovery."

"Bartholomew?" the old man murmured, as if he had not understood; "Bartholomew? he is praying to God? for me?"

"Come, come," exclaimed the young girl; "Bartholomew, Mother Anne, my uncle is better; he knows his poor Cecilia. Come!"

They all rose and approached the bed.

The old man looked in turn at each face, and appeared to regard with a special attention the young man, who was standing close to him, and over whose cheeks tears of joy were flowing. After a moment he held out his wasted hand to Bartholomew, and drew

him slowly to himself, until he could put his lips to the forehead of Cecilia's love; he gave him a kiss, perhaps the holy kiss of reconciliation.

Cecilia tottered, and was obliged to lean on the table to keep herself from falling. Her uncle's affectionate act had so struck her, that she trembled and seemed nearly fainting under the weight of her emotion. The other witnesses of this scene were not less touched; fresh tears gushed forth from their eyes.

All at once the beggar entered the room hurriedly,—

"Cecilia, Bartholomew, Janet, come quickly," said she, "come down quickly!"

She drew near the bed, saw with astonishment the good condition of the old man, and added,—

"Oh, God in heaven be thanked! Mother Anne stay here, but Bartholomew, Cecilia, and Janet must see the end of my work. Quick, come down all of you."

And as no one seemed to understand her, or make any movement to follow her, she took Bartholomew and Cecilia by the hand, and dragged them out of the room.

Below, before the old convent door, a crowd had collected, in the expectation of something. They were speaking with anger and horror of the attempted

murder committed by Matthew on the old man, and were rejoicing that he was about to receive the reward of his wickedness. The gendarmes had crossed the village, and the inhabitants had followed the agents of the law even to the convent.

Cecilia and Bartholomew were in the room on the ground floor, without knowing at what scene the beggar wished them to be present.

Suddenly they heard in the passage, which led to the back part of the house, the clang of arms, and the sound of heavy steps.

Whilst they listened with surprise and fear, and the beggar smiled triumphantly, two gendarmes appeared in the room, then two others, and between the latter, Matthew, his hands tied behind his back, his head hanging on his chest, pale, abashed, trembling, and, as it were, crushed.

Cecilia covered her eyes with both hands, uttered a cry, and turned towards the wall, not to witness this scene. Bartholomew, as if petrified, looked fixedly at the terrible *cortège* which defiled before him.

"Look!" exclaimed the beggar "that is how God punishes evil! and He has chosen a poor beggar to be His instrument."

And as the gendarmes approached the door with their prisoner, she exclaimed again,—

"Monster of hypocrisy, assassin! run, haste! the scaffold, the guillotine! and finally hell, hell! and eternal fire!"

Matthew, accompanied by the gendarmes, left the convent. When the peasants, men and women, saw him appear, there rose against him such a clamour for revenge, that he bent his head lower on his chest, and trembled as if he was afraid that his last hour had come. He was as pale as a corpse, his hair was in disorder, his clothes dirty and torn; his hands were covered with dry blood, he had so bruised and wounded himself in trying to tear the cellar door from its hinges.

The sight of this blood, to which they attributed a criminal origin, filled the peasants with fury.

They incited one another, by a thousand cries, to take vengeance on the guilty; they wanted to get possession of him, and, no doubt, they would have inflicted a summary and terrible justice, if the gendarmes, understanding the danger, had not drawn their swords, in order to defend the prisoner, if needful.

The enraged peasants renounced their projects of violence, but they accompanied the gendarmes to the village, loading the assassin with threats and imprecations, until, with his guards, he disappeared from their sight, on the road leading to the city.

Ten years have passed away since then. The old convent is transformed into a vast farm, whose stables contain three horses and twelve cows; maid servants and men vie with each other; the sound of labour re-echoes from morning till evening. The windows are painted green; the walls are repaired and whitened; everything attests ease and happiness.

When the sun shines, a feeble old man may be seen, seated on a bench beside the door, whose hands, weakened by age, tremble incessantly. Near him, an old woman is occupied knitting; the old man is playing with two little children, a boy and a girl, to whom he speaks of economy, assuring them that it is the source of all wealth. These are the children of his niece Cecilia; Bartholomew is their father, and they call the old woman grandmother Anne.

The old uncle has lent Bartholomew a large sum of money; at interest—at a small interest. These revenues, which are regularly paid to him, he saves for the little boy who is seated on his knees. He loves this little brat so much. He is his godson, and like him, is named John. The good uncle is so happy in his old age. He cavils, indeed, and finds fault constantly because the servants eat too much, and because of the thoughtlessness with which they cause expense of every kind. But Bartholomew and Cecilia

let him talk, and are never annoyed at what he says, so that everybody is happy.

Catherine, the poor widow, lives at the Chapel Farm; her children are already grown up, and work zealously. Bartholomew helps her; she will end by becoming a farmer in easy circumstances.

Janet is the wife of the gardener at the château, she lives in the midst of flowers, and is much beloved by her rich masters.

The wicked only suffers; he is in prison, and must remain there till God calls him before His judgment seat.

THE END.

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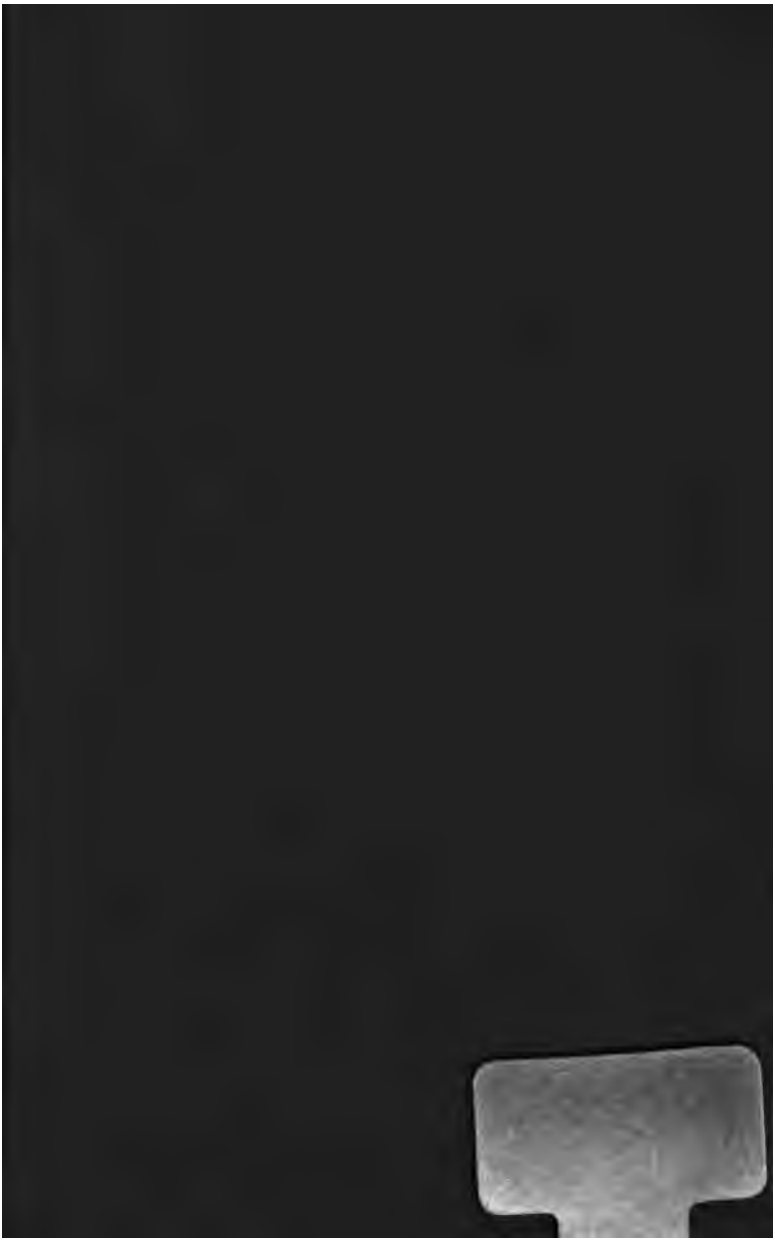

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